

***“The Road to Emmaus”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 8, 2018**

**First Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup>While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. <sup>6</sup>Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup>that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” <sup>8</sup>Then they remembered His words, <sup>9</sup>and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup>Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup>But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup>But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

**Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-35**

<sup>13</sup>Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. <sup>17</sup>And He said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered Him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” <sup>19</sup>He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed Him over to be condemned to death and crucified Him. <sup>21</sup>But we had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find His body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see Him.” <sup>25</sup>Then He said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into His glory?” <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, He walked ahead as if He were going on. <sup>29</sup>But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So He went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>When He was at the table with them, He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the road, while He was opening the scriptures to us?” <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and He has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



**Sermon: “The Road to Emmaus”**

Luke doesn't tell us much about the two travelers in this morning's reading, except to say they were going to Emmaus. But we can infer from the context of the story who they might be. In the first part of this reading, we learned that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna as well as “the other women with them” have gone to Jesus' tomb, found it empty, and have gone to tell what they have seen. Luke tells us in verse nine that “returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven *and to all the rest.*” Cleopas and the unnamed second traveler could have been part of this group included as “all the rest.”

We also know it was the practice of writers of that time to name only male figures and leave female figures unnamed AND that Luke was very careful to include the women who were present in his gospel accounts, so it is possible that the companion of Cleopas was a woman. And since a man of the time wouldn't have been travelling alone with a woman not his wife, the unnamed companion of Cleopas might very well have been his wife.

New Testament scholar Sharon Ringe points out that in John's version of the crucifixion story, he mentions: “Mary the wife of Clopas” as one of the women standing at the foot of the cross of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Could the “Clopas” of John's gospel be the same man Luke identifies as “CLE-opas”? And if the wife of Clopas was at the foot of the cross, perhaps she was one of the “other women” who went to the tomb with Mary and Mary Magdalene.

Cleopas and his wife might even have been an early missionary couple like Priscilla and Aquila who are mentioned several times in Acts and the letters of Paul.<sup>2</sup>

Either way, these two travelers, weary from the events that have transpired in previous days, are heading west, toward Emmaus and away from Jerusalem, when they are joined by a fellow traveler going the same way. We, the readers, know that this mystery traveler is Jesus, but they do not. So, I wonder, was there a sense within them that this guy looked familiar? Did they think at any point that maybe they *knew* Him... but just couldn't figure out how?

You've probably had experiences like that before, when you know you know someone, but you just can't remember from where. It happens to me all the time; usually while watching a movie. Mary and I often have conversations that go something like this: “Hey...where have we seen that actress before? Was she in that zombie movie... with the guy who played Woody on Cheers; what's his name? “No dear, you're thinking of Emma Stone. This is Kristen Bell....”

But if I run into a person I know out of context, sometimes I have a difficult time placing who they are and how I know them. A few months ago, on just a regular day, I walked out of Mary Shaffer's office and ran headlong into a man who was coming into the main office. His face looked familiar, but I couldn't place it. He certainly knew who I was, though. He greeted me with a loud “Hi Bill, how ya' doin'?!?”

This was clearly someone I knew. But I couldn't figure out where I knew him from... and I certainly couldn't call to mind a name. So, I'm not gonna' lie. I faked it for a minute or two, hoping to gather some context clues. I knew I knew his face, but from where? Was he a minister from around town? Someone I had met at a Presbytery event? Had I done his wedding or a funeral for a member of his family?

Eventually Mary Gause showed up and saved me. (Side note: It's shocking, frankly, how many of my stories end that way.) She called him by name and I realized that this was a member of our previous church in Clemson, SC. What in the world was he doing here?!? He was travelling for his work and decided since he was in the area, he would pop in to surprise us. But out of the context of that church and that community, and a full five years since we'd lived there, I was lost.

Whether it's characters on TV shows, or people we meet, or song lyrics or quotes, or any number of other things, sometimes we know that we know someone or something, but we just can't put a finger on how or from where. It's just right there on the tip of your tongue but you can't ... quite ... reach it. And so, I wonder if these two travelers felt something familiar but couldn't quite place it. And even if they thought He looked like or sounded like Jesus, the context was all wrong. Jesus couldn't be there walking and talking with them. Jesus was dead. His body was in a tomb several miles away.

Yes, they had heard the reports of Jesus' resurrection, but how often do people who have died actually come back from being dead? And if Jesus did come back to life, what would he be doing out here? On a dusty road in the middle of nowhere?

So, maybe we can at least understand how these two could fail to recognize the very person they were talking about as He walked right beside them. But the fact that they had heard about Jesus' resurrection and still did not expect to see Him explains why Jesus calls them "foolish" and "slow of heart to believe." They couldn't recognize Him because, in their minds, it made no sense for Him to be there. They believed He was dead.

As Luke tells the story, this "stranger" then begins to explain all that has happened in terms of Old Testament prophecy. Jesus opens the scriptures to them and teaches them, starting with Moses, how the Old Testament explains why things had to happen the way they did. You might imagine that to these two travelers, something seems familiar... there's something there on the tip of the brain... something about His mannerisms; His cadence of speech; something familiar, but they can't... quite... place it.

And when they arrive at Emmaus, the stranger prepares to part ways, for His journey is taking Him further west. But these two open their home to Him and invite Him to stay the night with them, for the hour is late. And as they sit down to eat, this stranger takes bread, blesses, and breaks it and gives it to them and we, the readers, remember Luke using similar words to describe the Last Supper ("...he took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them..."<sup>3</sup>). And just as we make that connection, so do Cleopas and his companion. It finally clicks for them. They recognize who this stranger is, and just as they do, He departs from them.

What is it that reminds them; that breaks through the fog and helps them to see this stranger for who He really is? A familiar act; the act of breaking bread and sharing it that they have probably seen a hundred times, most recently at the Passover meal, just three nights before. And as they think about it, they realize that their hearts were burning within them as he taught them on the road. That familiar face; that vague sense of recognition; what these two travelers could not place, all of a sudden becomes clear and they recognize Jesus in that time and place, just as we do today; in the word proclaimed and in the breaking of bread.

And we have similar experiences ("A-HA!" moments, we might call them) when we recognize Jesus in the everyday; when we see Jesus' face in the face of one across the table, wherever that table might be. And

we hear Jesus' voice proclaiming the word of God in the lyrics of a song on the radio or the words on the pages of a book.

The "Hollywood Jesus" movie study we do each month is founded on the idea that when we engage the world with open hearts and open minds, we will often encounter God there; we will see God's face and hear God's voice there.

The crazy thing about this story is that when Jesus is brought back to life, He doesn't go immediately to Pilate, or to the Jewish authorities, or to Rome to prove the power of God. He appears to women, and to these two travelers out in the middle of nowhere. And that reminds us that Jesus comes to us, too, and meets us where we are... not where we think we should be to meet Jesus. Jesus comes alongside us in our daily journeys; on the dusty roads to the places we frequent. And Jesus meets us in the mundane tasks of daily living.

It is a little bit unfortunate that we read this story through the lens of several hundred years of communion as a holy sacrament in the church. At one time, the breaking and sharing of bread would have been seen in more simple terms; as the most basic of tasks; as something done daily and usually, multiple times a day; as a ritual of necessity; a practice meant to restore life and give energy for the tasks ahead.

And it is in that type of activity that Jesus is finally recognized by Cleopas and his companion. Not in a high church affair; not in the temple reading from a scroll; not in the midst of crowds; not on a throne; not while healing the blind or making the lame to walk or raising the dead. No, Jesus is made plain to them in the teaching of the word and in the simple breaking of bread, in a humble home, in a nowhere town, to two people who this author did not see fit to mention before now, nor to mention again afterward.

And that is where Jesus meets us, too. We encounter Jesus in the basics of daily living, when we least expect to find Him and in the places we might not believe He would ever go.

There's a great line in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* where Adso, the novice, wonders aloud to his master, the Franciscan monk William of Baskerville, "Do you think that this is a place abandoned by God?" To which William replies, "Have you ever known a place where God *would* have felt at home?"<sup>4</sup>

We sometimes make the mistake of believing that Christ only comes to us in the bright places; the clean places; the places deemed holy by men and women. When what Luke shows us here is a vision of Christ who appears in the dusty forgotten places, to the inconsequential people, and who is revealed in the mundane tasks of every day, *if* we are able to recognize Him; *if* we are open to His presence; *if* we realize that our context is His context; *if* we expect to see Christ with and amongst us.

As R. Allen Culpepper writes "In the act of sharing their bread *with* a stranger they recognized the risen Lord *in* the stranger."<sup>5</sup> How easy might it have been for Cleopas and his companion to have let the stranger with whom they had been walking continue on His journey? How easy and how understandable?

We are a people who often stand on crowded elevators and, even though we are mere inches away from living, breathing souls, we resist eye contact; watching the numbers rise or fall as if the very function of the elevator depended on it.

Ours is a culture of independence mixed with suspicion in which we often avoid interacting with strangers. We have been taught since we were children not to talk to or accept candy from them and certainly not to get in a car with one and, sadly, there is much wisdom in those lessons.

But there is also truth that in the stranger we sometimes meet Jesus. Sometimes when we encounter our neighbors across the back fence, or our co-workers passing in the hallway, or those fellow travelers in the elevator, sometimes we are encountering the very presence of Christ. And sometimes, when we take the time to meet them; to look at them and to hear their stories; sometimes we hear Christ's voice and see Christ's face.

We come to worship in the hopes of seeing Jesus and of hearing His word (and we should) but when we are not in this sanctuary we should be just as ready to encounter Jesus, for He speaks to us in the voice of the old man standing in line at the coffee shop; He comes to us in the mother of three feeding her children at the YWCA Family Center Shelter. We meet Him in the stranger in the next bed in the hospital room of the person we came to visit. He appears to us in the guise of a homeless man asking for help, or a school child who needs a mentor, or a co-worker who needs a friend, or a stranger in traffic who just needs a break.

The truth of Easter is that Christ is Risen. That in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, God has shed the cloak of divinity and entered this broken, sinful world to show us the life that God intended for us; that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God has acted dramatically to defeat the worst this world has to offer. If we believe these truths, then we should certainly expect by the power of the Holy Spirit, to hear the voice of God and to see the face of God, sometimes in the most unlikely of places. In fact, we should probably expect it.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> John 19:25, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Ringe, Sharon H. "The Journey to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-35." *Westminster Bible Companion: Luke*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995. 286-88. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:19, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 155. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, R. Alan. "Luke 24:13-35, The Appearance on the Road to Emmaus." *The New Interpreter's Bible: The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John*. Ed. Leander Keck. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995. 482. Print.