

“On the Road from Emmaus”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2020

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?” ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?” ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Sermon: “On the Road from Emmaus”

Losing someone you love is hard. Cleopas knew that. So did his traveling companion. They had both experienced the death of family members, so the heaviness in their hearts they felt now wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. In the wake of Jesus’ death, they had made a decision to leave, and return to Emmaus. As they trudged ever closer to home, leaving Jerusalem and the chaos of the past few days behind them, they talked about what they were feeling and how they’d come to this point in their lives.

Jesus had been many things to many people. For those whose lives he had changed, he was a savior. For others, he was a teacher, and healer and miracle worker. He had done some truly remarkable things; making lame people walk and blind people see. Feeding thousands with just a little food, and casting out demons like day-old coffee grounds. And his sermons were truly something to behold. He really understood what it meant to be one of God’s people and he was always sticking it to those stodgy establishment Pharisees. He offered hope and a vision of God that shone with the light of love and grace and forgiveness. Because of that, he’d never had trouble attracting an audience. But for those who really knew him, like they had, Jesus was more than a sideshow attraction. He was their Rabbi; their friend. Like a mother, brother, teacher, and wise sage all rolled into one. And for him to just be gone like that. It stung.

But the thing about death is this: Status, wealth, power, matter not. Death comes for each in their own time. It does not discriminate. But then, neither does life. When death occurs, it doesn’t matter who mourns or how tragic the circumstances, the world keeps turning. The sun sets, the sun rises, and life continues; the rest of the world goes on about their business.

And that is how Cleopas and his companion came to be on the road to Emmaus that Sunday afternoon. They were going back to their old lives; the lives they had left to follow Jesus. They walked together for a long time, the silence between them broken only by the sound of their sandaled feet, padding along the dirt road as they journeyed west, following the afternoon sun toward home. Eventually they began to discuss the events of the previous days and what they might mean. They talked about how they had never seen God so clearly as they had in Jesus; about how hopeful they had been that he was the long-promised Messiah, and about how discouraged they were to have been so wrong. They commiserated with one another in their disappointment and consoled one another in their sorrow. For they grieved not just the life that Jesus lost, but also their own lives, forever changed. When Jesus died on a Roman cross, their hopes for the future died with

him. And as they struggled to adjust to this new life without Jesus, they found themselves grieving not only what had been lost, but also what now they believed, could never be.

And when their conversation hit an inevitable lull, one of them turned the topic to the story told by the women who had gone to Jesus' tomb that morning and found it empty. They had claimed that angels told them Jesus is alive. It was certainly an astounding story, but one most of the disciples had dismissed as just an idle tale. "If only it could be true," they agreed. "If only the one who saved so many, who raised Lazarus from the dead; if only he could save himself. "

It was then that Cleopas noticed the stranger walking beside them on the road. The Emmaus road may not have been the busiest of thoroughfares, but it was certainly well-traveled. So, it was normal for there to be other travelers nearby. But the sudden presence of this stranger startled them. They had been so involved in what they were talking about that the two had completely failed to notice his approach until he was right beside them.

But if the stranger's sudden presence was startling, it was no less so than the question he asked them. When he inquired as to what they were talking about and they told him they were discussing the things that had happened in Jerusalem, he asked them "What things?" They were shocked. How could it be that one coming from Jerusalem had no idea what had just happened there? How could he not have heard that the great prophet and showman, the one they called "Messiah" and "King of the Jews" had been arrested and tried and executed on a Roman cross? It was all anyone could talk about and yet this guy hadn't heard?

They dismissed him as just another gentile, or perhaps a Samaritan; someone who couldn't understand the depth of their pain and disillusionment. And that is when the stranger surprised them a second time. He began to speak, eloquently, explaining how the entire history of Israel had culminated in the life of Jesus and that what had befallen him, was all for God's purpose; a purpose foretold by the prophets as when Isaiah wrote:

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...[and] the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him..."¹ And "Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."² And especially "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."³

They stood with their mouths agape, stunned as much by the breadth of their own misunderstanding as they were by the depth of his wisdom. With patience he taught them as they walked on, carefully explaining to them what, blinded by their grief, they had been unable to see for themselves.

As the sun began to sink below the horizon, they found themselves standing in the Emmaus town square, pleading with their new companion not to travel on, but to stay with them until the morning when the traveling would be safer. And so, he did. And when they sat down with him at their own table, in their own home, surrounded by their own things, preparing to share a meal, they were for the third time that day surprised by the stranger. For at their table, he committed a slight breach of etiquette by serving as host to them. He took the loaf from the table, and after giving thanks to God, he broke it and gave it to them. And in those acts of taking, blessing, breaking, giving, they saw the familiar movements and heard the familiar voice of their old master and friend. It was like when you stare at a picture of a vase and realize it is also a picture of two people kissing. They had been watching and listening to him all afternoon, but only then did they see him. And in that moment of discovery and surprise and explosive joy... he was gone.

It took another moment for their mouths to catch up with their racing hearts. "Did he... was that... did you see him too?" And after taking a moment to make sure he wasn't in the bathroom or hadn't just popped out for some air, they gathered themselves and then raced out the door, hurrying back toward Jerusalem. Their own experience of the risen Christ was a story too good *not* to tell. And when they arrived in Jerusalem, they would share it with the other disciples, and in their story the disciples who had doubted the women that morning would find another reason to believe. And so, they hurried, running at times, trying to shorten the 7 mile walk as much as they could.

Their first journey of the day had taken them *away* from Jerusalem, *away* from the cross, *away* from a life of discipleship. It had been slow, and full of grief, disappointment, and confusion. But this new journey was taking them back toward Jerusalem, back toward the cross, toward the work of discipleship, toward the Kingdom of God. And this was a much faster trip; one characterized by joy, and excitement and a renewed sense of purpose.

As they were rushing through the moonlit night toward Jerusalem it suddenly struck Cleopas, that Jesus had never given them any instructions on what to do next. Jesus hadn't told them to go back. He hadn't told them to do *anything*. Their returning to Jerusalem was purely out of a sense of needing to respond to the goodness of God they had experienced in Christ. An experience that left them with no other choice. Not because they were being forced to go back, but because in love and grace and mercy, Christ had come to them where they were, in their despair, on a dusty road in the middle of nowhere, as they were leaving behind the life to which Jesus had called them. They were quitting, you see. Walking away.

❖ 3 ❖

And yet Jesus came to them anyway. And made no demand on them. Only loving them. Teaching them. Sharing grace with them.

It was that experience of the living Christ that drove Cleopas and his companion back to Jerusalem that night, back to the life of discipleship, back to the journey towards God's Kingdom. And it is that same experience of Christ's grace, mercy, and steadfast love that meets us where we are; that comes without demands or expectations that has inspired every disciple since.

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

End Notes

¹ Isaiah 11:1-2, NRSV

² Isaiah 2:3-4, NRSV

³ Isaiah 53:5, NRSV