

## MISSING EASTER

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, [14] and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. [15] While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, [16] but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. [17] And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. [18] 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?" [19] 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, [20] and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. [21] 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. [22] Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, [23] 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. [24] 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." [25] Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! [26] Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" [27] Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

[28] As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. [29] 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. [30] When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. [31] Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. [32] 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?" [33] That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. [34] They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" [35] Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## MISSING EASTER

Did you miss Easter this year? Some people did.

One member told me that the golf course was absolutely full as he drove to church this past Easter. They missed Easter in order to play golf. Some missed Easter because they were visiting with family and friends. Some people always miss Easter.

But, I'm not talking about those people this morning because I know that this doesn't apply to you.

I know that most ... if not all of you here this morning didn't miss Easter. You were ready for Easter. You couldn't wait for Easter. Some of you even attended both services so that you could bring the congregation special music on Easter. Easter was a big day for you and for me.

But, it's possible to be in church on Easter and still miss the message. I'm sure that there were some in church this past Easter who saw the resurrection joy around them but did not experience that joy in their own life.

It happens every year. People overwhelmed by a broken spirit or sorrow or sickness hear the message, but they have a hard time believing the message. They attend the Easter service, but the joy of Easter somehow passes them by. They miss Easter.

I think that is true for all of us at least some of the time. It's hard to keep up that Easter enthusiasm. Sometimes the news seems just too good to be true. We're not sure if we can trust those who tell us the story of a resurrection. There is too much evidence to the contrary in our own life.

Easter may have come for those other people, but not for us. We're on the way out of town with a lump in our throat and a heavy heart.

If that describes you, if you feel like you missed Easter this year, today's lesson is just what you need. It's good news for those who missed Easter.

## THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

On that first Easter evening two disciples are on the way out of town ... on their way to Emmaus to be precise. Now where is Emmaus you ask? Well, that's a good question and one that's not so easy to answer.

We learn in our lesson that Emmaus was about seven miles out of Jerusalem, but historians are not really sure where Emmaus might have been located today. Apparently Emmaus wasn't big enough or important enough to be remembered by history.

But, the exact location of Emmaus doesn't really matter. The destination of the disciples is symbolic. Emmaus is that place where the broken-hearted go to get away. Emmaus is the road to nowhere. Emmaus is that place we go when we leave Jerusalem, the City of Promise and head for the "hills" of despair.

And the question this passage asks is how can we get off the road to Emmaus and get back on the road to Jerusalem?

How do we get off the road to despair and get back on the road to hope?

How can we believe what others have told us about resurrection?

Where can we find the Risen Christ in a world that seems bent on ignoring him?

Actually, the story suggests that the Risen Christ finds us.

## GRIEF AND MISUNDERSTANDING

I imagine that these despondent disciples were so involved in talking to each other about the events of Holy Week that they didn't even notice at first when a stranger walked up to them on the road.

It's understandable. They were in shock. I've counseled with people in shock. They need to tell their tragic story over and over again. It's as if they cannot believe what has happened and have to gradually let the terrible reality become a part of their lives.

Maybe that's why the Scripture tells us that these disciples did not recognize Jesus. Their grief prevented them from seeing anyone else or hearing any story except their own story.

Jesus told his disciples about his death and resurrection before it happened, but the Bible consistently tells us that none of those disciples understood what he was talking about. Resurrection you see was a totally new one of kind occurrence.

Resurrection was (as the Apostle Paul would later put it) a new creation. The old was passing away and the new was coming. (2 Corinthians 5:17) Disciples always have a hard time recognizing the new thing that God is doing. (Isaiah 43:19)

## MEETING GOD IN THE STRANGER

But, I think their lack of recognition was due to more than just overwhelming grief or a lack of understanding. They did not recognize Jesus because it was a part of God's plan. The Bible tells us that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." They didn't recognize Jesus because God didn't let them recognize Jesus.

Now why would God do this? Why would God blind these brokenhearted disciples to the truth about the stranger on the road? It was to teach these disciples (and us) that the Spirit of the Risen Christ often comes to us by means of a stranger on the road.

Certainly there was something familiar about this man they met on the way. As the disciples would later say, there was something about this man that made their hearts "burn" as he talked to them and explained the Scriptures to them.

And I imagine that from this day forward whenever these disciples would meet a stranger on the road they would look a little closer and listen a bit more carefully than they ever had before. Every moment of the rest of their life was changed by that encounter on the road.

Think about it. If you had been one of those disciples and met the “disguised” Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, don’t you think that you would treat strangers differently for the rest of your life?

Well, the Bible teaches us that we are those disciples on the road to Emmaus. We have met the Risen Christ in the person of strangers who have joined us on the road.

In Matthew’s gospel we read that the presence of Christ is often “hidden” in that needy stranger who joins us on the road of life. Even the smallest gesture of kindness ... food for the hungry or water for the thirsty can be a significant moment in our lives. It can be a time when we are enabled to recognize the presence of the Risen Christ. (Matthew 25:31-46)

### THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Quite a few people have told me about the importance of a spiritual renewal program called Cursillo or The Walk to Emmaus. This is a weekend retreat in which the participants study Scripture and are served by other people, people who are often strangers.

The retreat ends when the group takes communion together on a Saturday night. And I am told that quite often in the breaking of bread, something happens. Eyes are often to the presence of Christ in a new way.

Quite often the participants can’t put their finger on why this spiritual retreat is so effective, but quite often they want others to have the same experience. They take it upon themselves to financially sponsor others so that they can experience their own Walk to Emmaus. One of our Bible study members said that it has been many years since she participated in this program, but she still remembers the positive impact that it had on her life.

I think that this program and others like it can be a helpful experience to many people. But, I would also caution us that spiritual growth consists of more than just a one time experience at a weekend retreat.

In fact our Scripture for today suggests that even a one time encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus is not the end of the story. There is always another journey to take and another revelation to experience. The journey of faith may begin on the road to Emmaus, but it never ends.

Did you ever wonder why, after the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread at supper that he immediately “vanished from their sight”?

I think this is another instance where disciples are not allowed to “hold on” to the Risen Christ. We talked about that on Easter Sunday ... how Mary wanted to hold on to Jesus. But, Jesus wouldn’t let her. Jesus told her that she had to let go and move on and tell others.

And I think that's why the disciples on the road to Emmaus got such a fleeting glimpse of Jesus. It forced them to go in a different direction. It forced them to turn around and go back to Jerusalem and meet with the other disciples who also had a story to tell.

They had not missed Easter after all. Easter had come to them on the road to despair. And that long face of despair was changed into the Spirit of hope. That Spirit energized these disciples to go in a different direction, and that same Spirit energizes us as well.

## EASTER IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR

We ministers would like to hold on to Easter. We say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if every day was like Easter? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the crowds on the third Sunday after Easter were as great as the crowds on Easter Sunday?"

I think that would be great. I think the Easter message is too big to be contained in just one Sunday.

But, I also think that we ministers need to remember that Easter is not about big crowds and beautiful music. Easter is about the joy of the Risen Christ. Easter is about how lives are changed by an encounter with the Risen Christ. Sometimes that happens in a filled house of worship, but often it is that providential encounter on the lonely road that makes the difference.

Someone in our study had a Bible that summarized the appearances of the Risen Christ. One of those appearances was to a crowd of over 500 people at once.

But, most of those appearances were to just a few disciples, disciples who were filled with doubt and discouragement. In the Bible Easter often comes most often to those who are overwhelmed by grief and despair. Easter often comes to those who know that things have gotten out of hand and only God can make a difference.

This is when Easter often comes to me. It doesn't come when the crowds are large and the living is easy. Easter comes when the night is dark and the news is bad. And on that lonely road I meet a stranger who looks vaguely familiar.

He preaches words that are also familiar but in my hour of need those familiar words come alive in a new way. My heart burns within me, and then for an instant I can see. Jesus was with me every step of the way.

## EASTER ON SATURDAY

A minister in North Carolina told a story about an encounter with the Risen Christ that occurred on Saturday. It seems that one of his members had signed him up to go on a tour of a local drug treatment program on that Saturday. The bus left the church at 9:00 AM. The pastor was not excited about the trip. He knew about mission. He had toured these facilities before, but the member who had signed him up was insistent.

The pastor didn't do what I would have done. I would have said, "Sorry, I work on my sermons on Saturday morning, and I'm certainly not going to miss that time. It's too important."

This pastor felt the same way, but his name wasn't Frank; he wasn't as blunt as I can be sometimes. So, he swallowed his emotions, put on his best "pastoral" smile, and sadly made his way to the church for this mission trip.

He wrote,

"I got on that bus a little late and picked a seat across from a man who, once the bus started, stood up on that bus. But because of his enormous height, he had to curl over until he was almost over my head. He gave a great big smile that came equipped with a gold tooth right up front, and in a deep voice he introduced himself as 'Alphonso.'

Well, Alphonso launched into a story about his life about the terrible side of alcohol and cocaine addiction and having been kicked out of his house and then his mother's house, and then his brother's house, and his sister's house, and his aunt's house. He said, 'Pretty soon there wasn't any house to be kicked out of, and I was on the streets.' He shared his pain, and I felt as though I could reach out and touch his wounds.

But then he said, 'A stranger rescued me and got me into the Phoenix house program, and God is so good. God is so very good. I'm thankful that God never gave up on me. I got a job, and a job gave me a home, and a home gave me a family. God is so very good.'

What I thought was going to be a journey to look at facilities, well, this wasn't about facilities. We got off the bus and walked up the sidewalk, up the steps and in the door and again...no facilities. Testimony!

'I thank God that I have a roof over my head,' she said. 'I thank God that I have food on my table! I'm learning how to type, so I can get a job. I thank God, and I thank God for you too.'

She looked at one of our members and said, 'Because without people like you, who help make this place possible, I don't know if I would be alive. I just thank everyone I see, because you never know who the angels are among us.'

One of the women who worked for the organization told the group,

'I'm not saying that we don't have failures. Sometimes we don't hear back from our graduates, and when we don't hear back, we worry. Most of the time we don't hear back because they've fallen off the wagon or are embarrassed to call us.'

She said, 'I've gone down to police stations in the middle of the night and told a young girl in chains, 'When you get out of jail, I'll be right here for you! Don't you ever think that I've forgotten about you. I haven't. I haven't forgotten about you...because God never forgets about you!'"

He said that there was “one resurrection story after another that day.”

He was walking around the one of the houses we had visited, pondering what he had heard, and he wandered into the kitchen.

And there was one of the residents holding a box of animal crackers. She smiled at him and held out the box. "Want one?"

He shrugged and reached down inside that box and pulled out a cookie, and I looked at it. When it comes to animal crackers, he said that he always wants to know what he's eating. It was a lion.

She reached down in the box and said, "I got a lion too!" She laughed and said, "God bless you!"

I said, "God bless you..."

"What's your name?" she said. I said, "Donovan. What's yours?"

The pastor wrote,

“As I left that group home on my way to the bus to go back to the church, I thought about a God who never gives up on anyone. I thought about how we can't either. I thought about strangers who come out of nowhere to reach out a hand.

I thought about angels unaware. I thought about past pain and new hope. I thought about how miserable my day had started and how good it was now.

I thought about all of this, as they mixed in my mind with that after taste of animal crackers and grape Gatorade.”

## WORD AND SACRAMENT

The typical interpretation of today's passage is to say that we meet the presence of the Risen Christ through the ministry of Word and Sacrament. When the Bible is rightly preached and the Lord's Supper is rightly administered Christ is present with us.

I believe that. I am ordained to that as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

But, sometimes I think we make it too liturgical and impersonal. Sometimes the Spirit of Christ comes to us in a powerful worship service. Sometimes when I say the words of Jesus, “This is my body that is broken for you.” It is almost as if Jesus is with us here and now.

But, more often the presence of Jesus comes not from the preacher but from that person who sits on your right or left this morning. You may not know them, but God knows them. And God knows that many of them have a reason to be sad this day. Many of them are on the road to Emmaus.

And yet they have not missed Easter. They are here because they have seen the Lord. They are here because they have a story to tell. They are here because they have been convinced by Jesus to go back to Jerusalem, the city of hope. They have been convinced by the Risen Christ that the promise is eternal and God knows their name.

Today we take communion, and I want us to think about how God comes to us in the voice of a stranger or in the voice of a person who is who is very close. If you don't know the name of the person sitting next to you or if you've forgotten their name, don't be ashamed to ask.

And as the elements of communion are passed around today, I want you to use the name of that person on your left or right and say to them, "The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you."

This will remind us of the sacred truth that the presence of Christ might be found in the voice of a stranger or even in the voice of one we know quite well.

May God be present with us in the breaking of bread. May He open our eyes so that this year we won't miss Easter.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)