

“Going in a Different Direction”

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Luke 24:13-35

13 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.

REPEATING THE STORY

Two of Jesus' former disciples are on the road to Emmaus. According to the Scripture Emmaus was about seven miles from Jerusalem.

Considering what had just happened in Jerusalem, I'm sure these disciples were more than happy to get out of town. You see today's story takes place three days after the crucifixion of Jesus.

And these disciples are deeply discouraged.
In fact, you might say that they were in shock.

Have you ever been in an accident?

Right after it happens you have to keep telling your story over and over again. It's like you can't believe what happened, and you need to keep telling the story in order to let it sink in.

That's what these disciples were doing as they traveled on down the road to Emmaus. They were going over and over the events of the past few days, trying to make sense of what had happened.

Telling the story over and over again sort of takes the pain away for a while. Your mind tricks into thinking that if you can only make sense of something is essentially senseless ... then maybe you can somehow come to terms with what has happened.

You can see this dynamic in these recent school shootings. In response to the tragedy, parents and children try to do something...influence politicians, make some change in the system in order to prevent a future tragedy.

But, then in the middle of an interview a distraught parent will say something like, "But, of course none of this will bring back my daughter."

The cruel fact is that some tragedies never leave us. The rest of our life is shaped by that tragedy.

This was true for these disciples.
They were headed out of town.

First stop Emmaus, seven miles away from Jerusalem.

But, no matter how far they went, whether it was seven or seventy miles, it wouldn't be far enough to escape the pain.

Jerusalem would always be in their hearts and minds. We see this in the next scene in our story.

THE STRANGER

A stranger joins these two disciples and asks them what they're talking about. The last thing these grieving disciples want to do is talk with a stranger about their loss.

The Bible says they stood still, looking sad.
We need to pause on that sentence.
"They stood still, looking sad."

Try to imagine that.

Two discouraged disciples.
They're on an empty dusty road to nowhere.
(Emmaus was so small and insignificant that we don't even have a record of it today.)

The sun is setting in the background.
And they just stand there.
Looking down at the ground for a long time.

The stranger's question caused them to stop dead in their tracks and face what they didn't want to face again.

Sorrow welled up in their hearts afresh.
You can tamp that pain down only so long.
And then it comes bubbling to the surface again.

Cleopas, the only disciple named in this story, finally answers the stranger's question with a question of his own. A question that betrays his deep sorrow...and anger.

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

I've learned to tread lightly when I encounter someone on the road to Emmaus. Pain and sorrow can easily lead to rage.

I sure don't want to get in the way of that.

But, this stranger is persistent.
He doesn't seem to be put off by their impatience.

He asks,

"What things?
What are you talking about?
I don't know. Tell me."

And despite their pain and anger, the story just comes tumbling out again. They tell the stranger about Jesus...

...a prophet mighty in word in deed.
Everybody recognized it.

But, then he was arrested, condemned and crucified by our own religious and political leaders.

WE HAD HOPED

And then they said,

"We had hoped
...that he was the one to redeem Israel."

"We had hoped."
But, no more.

The disciples had been hoping for a long time But, Good Friday dashed those hopes.
Hope was crucified, dead and buried.

The disciples go on to tell the stranger about some strange things had happened since the crucifixion.

“A few of our women said that they saw a vision of angels at the tomb and that the tomb was empty. Some of our men went to see for themselves. The tomb was empty, but Jesus was not there.”

Don't mistake this for faith.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus thought the talk of angels by the women was, as Luke tells us earlier, an “idle tale”.

And the absence of Jesus' body was not proof. It was the last straw. He couldn't even have the honor of a decent burial.

Notice also what they were hoping for.

They were hoping Jesus was the one to “redeem Israel”.

In other words they hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah. All the gospels agree that this was the hope of the disciples and many others who followed Jesus.

They wanted a Messiah.

And what is the job description for a Messiah?

The Messiah is a military leader.

He leads an insurrection against the power that be. He eliminates injustice and oppression.

He rides into town on a white war horse proclaiming victory.

But, Jesus rode into town on a donkey.

And he was crucified by the people he came to save.

That did not look like a picture of redemption to these disciples.

They had hoped Jesus had come to redeem Israel ... but not any more.

OUR DASHED HOPES

“We had hoped” ... those three words capture that painful moment when we realize that our dreams, whatever they are ...will not be coming true.

The things that we’ve worked for and longed for are now beyond reach. The tragedy that changes our life forever.

All of us are going to spend some time on the road to Emmaus.

The road of regret.
The road of disappointment.

The road of anger.
The road of deep sorrow.

And when we’re on that road, we have a hard time seeing and hearing anything.

Jesus himself could be walking with us, and we would be kept from recognizing him.

And the Bible tells us that’s exactly what happened to these two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus himself was with them.
But, they were kept from recognizing him.

In the gospels everyone is blind until Jesus helps them see. And that’s why all of us can sing Amazing Grace with such gusto.

We know it’s true.
We too are blind.

Sight is a gift that must be granted by the Lord. We cannot see that new world coming until God gives us the gift of spiritual sight.

And that’s what happens in our lesson for today.

“Blind” disciples are given a lesson in how to see the world in a new way.

BIBLE STUDY ON THE ROAD

In order to learn something new, we sometimes have to unlearn something that we think we know.

One of the greatest hindrances to meaningful Bible study is that we rely too much on what others have said about a passage and not really being open to what the Bible actually says.

This is a problem for experienced students of the Bible as well as those who are just starting their journey of faith.

Jesus often talked about how the religious leaders had replaced God’s law with their own interpretation of the law.

They neglected the more important parts of God’s word because they were bogged down in irrelevant details emphasized by their religious leaders.

That’s easy to do.

In fact, I think we in the church still do that.

Church meetings can often be a time to reinforce what we already believe instead of hearing Scripture with fresh ears.

When we have a certain image of what God is like and what a Messiah should do and be, any new revelation has a hard time making it into our way of thinking.

That’s why Jesus tells the disciples on the road to Emmaus that they were foolish and “slow of heart to believe”. Their understanding of the Bible was skewed by their assumptions.

So, Jesus helped these blind disciples see.

He showed them a Messiah in the Scriptures who was different from the one that had heard about before.

This Messiah would bring God's glory to earth, not through military might but through sacrifice and suffering.

And as Jesus explained the Scriptures, the disciples began to change. Their "slow" hearts began to burn with faith.

THEY RECOGNIZED HIM

This new way of looking at the Scripture created a burning desire to know more.

The disciples came to the place where they were going to spend the night. And they thought Jesus was going on down the road.

But, these disciples who had holy heart burn begged him not to go. They wanted to know more.

So, they said, "It's almost dark.
Come and stay with us."
So Jesus came in with them.

And that night at supper Jesus took the bread and blessed and broke it. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Do those words sound familiar?
They should. They're the same words I use every month when we prepare to take the Lord's Supper.

Apparently the so-called Last Supper is a misnomer.

The Passover before the crucifixion wasn't the last supper Christ would have with his disciples.

The risen Christ was still at table with them. He was still opening the eyes of those who could not or would not see. He was still feeding disciples with the bread of life.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

But, as soon as these disciples recognized Jesus, he was gone. The Bible says that he "vanished from their sight."

Where did he go?

The disciples on the road to Emmaus seem to know. He's going back to Jerusalem to be with his other disciples. And they immediately made a change in their travel plans.

They leave that very hour for Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is no longer the symbol of pain and death. It is once again the Holy City, the place where God's dream is born.

In Jerusalem, these disciples who had been on the road find many other disciples.

And they find out that they're not the only ones who have seen Jesus. These disciples tell them, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

The Emmaus disciples then tell their story.

NOT A GHOST

This is where I've ended our Scripture reading for today. But, it's not the end of Luke's story. As the disciples encourage each other, Jesus appears to all of them. (Luke 24:26-52)

This encounter is very similar to the lesson we read about last week from John's gospel. Jesus enters and says, "Peace be with you."

But, amazingly, despite the reports of the resurrection and the actual presence of Jesus, they do not have faith. Instead, they are afraid and wonder if they have seen a ghost.

Jesus tries to calm their fears and doubts. He assures them that he's no ghost.

He invites them to examine his hands and his feet. And he also asks for something to eat. They give him a piece of broiled fish and he eats it.

That confirms it for the disciples.
Ghosts don't eat broiled fish!

WITNESSES

And then Jesus proceeds to do for these disciples what he has already done for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

He has a Bible study and explains what the Kingdom of God is really like. It's about a Messiah who takes on the sin of the world. It's about forgiveness and God's love.

And those frightened, doubt filled disciples become witnesses. They bring the good news about Jesus to Jerusalem and then to the whole world.

When the Holy Spirit comes upon this group they will be on the road again. But, this trip will not be the discouraging, hopeless road to nowhere Emmaus.

This trip will be a mission trip.
And these Spirit filled disciples will bring the gospel to the world.

THE STORY CONTINUES

I've been saying these past few weeks that it's important to remember that the stories in the Bible are not just about what happened way back when. They're also stories about what happens here and now.

When we read the Scriptures with an open mind and a sense of humility, they still have the power to open our eyes to the presence of Christ.

When we break bread together, that fellowship can become something more than just a meal. It can become a sacrament that gives us hope and strength for the days ahead.

When we talk about how God's amazing grace has changed our life, the kingdom can come on earth as well as in heaven.

I like the way Susan Andrews put it in the Christian Century. She wrote that hearts pounding out of fear become... "burning hearts. And burning hearts become loving hearts.

And so the heart of God continues to beat."

GOD IN THE STRANGER

The heart of God continues to beat. The Spirit of the risen Christ continues to meet us.

Like the disciples of old, we are still a community that still struggles with doubt fear, sin, and failure. The church has been described as a hospital for sinners. And guess what? All us are sick.

But, the great physician does not leave us alone. When broken people come together in the name of Christ, He is also with us.

He forgives us. He comforts us. He points us toward the kingdom that comes.

And he challenges us to go in a different direction and follow him.

God still comes to us.

He comes to us as the stranger who somehow seems familiar.

I think of that passage from Matthews's gospel. It is the last judgment, and how are the people judged?

They are judged by how they treated the hidden Jesus. Jesus we learn is found in the least among us.

When we treat others with compassion our eyes are opened. And we learn that Jesus visited us when we served that stranger in need.
(See Mathew 25:31-46)

Today's story teaches the same lesson.

When the disciples got to Emmaus, the unrecognized Jesus acted like he was going on down the road.

But, the disciples asked this stranger to come and stay with them that night.

Think about that.

If they hadn't asked this stranger to come and stay with them, they would have never seen the risen Christ.

How would you change if you really thought that Jesus traveled with you each day... hidden and yet as close as the neighbor next door?

Jesus does indeed travel with us each day. Life is not just one thing after another. Life is a journey taken in faith.

And sometimes we need someone to turn us around and point us in the right direction.

Like those first disciples we find ourselves at the crossroads of faith and doubt.

So we come together each week to be fed by the Word of God and nourished by the community of faith.

We break bread together, and we remind each other of what it means to have hearts that burn and hearts that love.

Amen,