

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 11, 2021

“To a Village Called Emmaus”
Luke 24:13-35

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This morning, I'm hoping you'll hear—really, hear—the story of the Road to Emmaus. And what a story! As the biblical scholar Tom Wright puts it: “At the level of drama it has everything. Sorrow, suspense, puzzlement, gradual dawning of light; [...] unexpected actions, astonished recognition,” then “a flurry of excitement and activity.” To hear this story, we'll explore it by slowing down with it, noticing the little details that make this story come alive for us as a witness and reflection of the life of faith. And as I retell the story, I'd like you to listen for the moments that seem somehow familiar, as this two-thousand-year-old story can—maybe surprisingly—reflect contemporary experiences of Christian faith.

“Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened (vv. 13-14). The story begins on Easter Evening: the last thing to happen in Luke's Gospel was the announcement of resurrection: “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles,” Luke wrote (24:10), and Peter ran to the tomb, found it empty—then the story jumps ahead to evening on the Road to Emmaus, as two disciples who've heard these reports of resurrection now journey together slowly. The location of Emmaus isn't clear, but what's noted is the distance—“about seven miles”—offering plenty of time to reflect on what's just happened.

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them” (v. 15). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian I focused on for my doctoral dissertation, described the church, in his doctoral dissertation, as “Christ existing as community” (“Christus als Gemeinde existierend”). Similarly, as part of our Lenten series on *Living Faith*, we explored church as “Christ together with his people” (7.1.1)—how it's the presence of Christ that constitutes church, that makes church *church*. And on the Road to Emmaus, we see Christ coming alongside, offering his presence. Notice, they don't compel him or control him: here, it's the Risen Christ, in his sovereignty, who freely chooses to join these disheartened disciples. *This is the Risen Lord who comes alongside.*

“but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (v. 16). Christ's presence is all the more remarkable when we realize these maybe aren't the most faith-filled disciples: the Risen Christ comes to them, face-to face, and still they fail to recognize him. It's not clear what exactly prevents them from recognizing him—but it's possible their own expectations limit their perception: seeing only what they believe possible, they can't see what's in front of them; disbelieving the reports of resurrection, they disbelieve the Risen Christ in the flesh. *Yet still the Risen Lord comes alongside.*

“And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’” (v. 17). Notice how Jesus—still unrecognized—enters into their experience, listening to them, inviting them to speak, to share with him what they've been discussing. In Christ, God was not content to be God on high without become God beside...and here we see how Jesus draws near, concretely and deeply. *The Risen Lord comes alongside intimately.*

“They stood still, looking sad. 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?’ 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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” (vv. 17-21). Notice their sorrow, their disappointment, their experience of dejection. For a moment, they can’t even keep walking: “They stood still, looking sad,” Luke writes (v. 17). And there’s that very human detail, that maybe they’d rather not talk about it anymore: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” they ask (v. 18), perhaps hoping to avoid having to recite again the violence of crucifixion. They then tell the story of Good Friday in a way that’s uninfluenced by the events of Easter. They’ll get to that later, more quietly...but at first, they tell only of Jesus, “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God,” who was “crucified” (vv. 19-20). There’s one mention of hope here, but—tragically, poignantly—they describe hope only in the past tense: “But we *had hoped* [ἤμεῖς δὲ ἠλπίζομεν] that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21).

“Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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” (vv. 22-24). They finally share the reports of resurrection—but notice how Easter really hasn’t changed their perspective on Good Friday. You may remember that, in Lent, I preached about how, in John’s Gospel, crucifixion-resurrection-ascension appear as one “continuous” movement (Brown); yet here, on the Road to Emmaus, we encounter the opposite. They’ve seen death on Good Friday, and they’ve heard news of life on Easter Sunday—but there’s this disconnection. They explain that Jesus was crucified; they confess, despairingly, that they “had hoped” for so much more—but then they add, almost as an afterthought, that “moreover” (ἀλλὰ καὶ) they’ve received reports of resurrection... The story of Easter Sunday has not yet reshaped their understanding of Good Friday.

“Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (vv. 25-27). Notice that Jesus does not leave them to their hopelessness or abandon them to their unbelieving reaction to the empty tomb. He reproaches them for their foolishness, for their “slowness of heart” in that wonderful phrase (καὶ βραδεῖς τῇ καρδίᾳ τοῦ πιστεῦειν)—but he does not leave them there. Instead, Jesus enacts what we pray for, Sunday after Sunday, in the Prayer for Illumination: Jesus enables them to hear, in the fullness of faith, how God has spoken Christ through the Scriptures, *as the Risen Lord makes himself known*.

“As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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” (vv. 28-29). As these two disciples invite this stranger to stay, they unknowingly call upon the presence of the Risen Christ, in words echoed in hymnody. “Stay with us, because it is almost evening,” they plead—and we sing, “Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide” (Lyte). And Jesus—who, throughout this story, has offered his presence to these two dejected disciples—here he offers his presence once again. Luke tells us, in words that sound like answered prayer to anyone who seeks Christ’s presence, “he went in to stay with them.” And what a difference his presence makes!

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?’” (vv. 30-32). In the breaking of bread, the disciples realize Jesus had been with them on their journey. Yet notice also that, though Christ is present, and comes alongside, he remains sovereign, free, unbounded by human limitations—“and,” Luke tells us, “he vanished from their sight” (v. 31). *The Risen Lord becomes present in the breaking of bread, yet remains at once beside us and beyond us.*

“That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (vv. 33-35). Soon, this experience of the presence of the Risen Christ propels them to retrace their steps. It’s maybe easy to miss the geographic details here: remember, Emmaus was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And, when they’d asked Jesus to stay, it was already late, getting dark. Yet, after the breaking of bread, and their experience of recognition, they decide they must return to the fellow disciples—not first thing in the morning, but *now*. On the Road to Emmaus, they’d walked slowly—even stopping, with sorrow—but this time they rush, thrilled by their encounter with the Risen Christ. And they meet the other disciples, sharing with one another their experiences of Easter resurrection.

We—in hearing this story—watching as hopeless and discouraged disciples become hopeful and joyful through the presence of Christ, recognized through the Scriptures and the breaking of bread...we maybe glimpse how this is also *our story*. Perhaps the Road to Emmaus is a story *in which we can also find ourselves*. The story of Emmaus, like the story of our lives of faith, *centres on the Risen Lord who comes alongside us intimately yet freely, making himself known through the Scriptures and through the breaking of bread, remaining beside us yet beyond us.*

Tom Wright, the scholar I quoted at the beginning of this sermon, says this about the story of the Road to Emmaus: “It is [...] a wonderful, [...] spellbinding tale, and also a model [...] for a great deal of what being a Christian [...] is all about. The slow, sad dismay at the failure of human hopes; the turning to someone who might or might not help; the discovery that in scripture, all unexpected, there lay keys which might unlock the central mysteries and enable us to find the truth; the sudden realization of Jesus himself, present with us, warming our hearts with his truth, showing us himself as bread is broken.” In this way, Wright adds, the story “describes the experience of innumerable Christians,” and “goes quite a long way to explaining what it is about Christianity that grasps us and holds us in the face of so much that is wrong with the world, with the church, and with ourselves.”

I invite you to reread this story today, or later this week, looking for connections with your own life and experience of faith. Where might you connect with this story? Do you sympathise with the disciples, losing hope and struggling to receive the news of Easter? Do you resonate with the disciples, calling for Jesus to remain with them and recognizing him in the breaking of bread? Have you ever been like the disciples, discovering Christ in the Scriptures, so that your heart also warmed within you? And could you, like the disciples, be propelled to respond to the Risen Christ in new ways? May you, by reflecting on the Road to Emmaus, find yourselves *in this story*. Amen.