

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 7, 2024**

**“And Went with Them”
Luke 24:13-35**

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When I was seminary, we once had a very practical class about what *not* to say to someone who’s grieving. The professor talked about examples of clichés that are more harmful than helpful. I won’t list them, but I think you could summarize them all like this: when a person is grieving, don’t say something that pretends everything is okay.

Things aren’t okay; that’s why they’re grieving. When someone has suffered loss—the loss of a loved one, the loss of health, the loss of a part of themselves—things aren’t okay. Maybe they will be eventually, but not now. A silver-lining look-on-the-bright-side sort of comment might be helpful someday, but not yet. Because when we’re grieving, we’re nowhere near ready for that: sometimes, when we’re deep in grief, we’re just not yet ready to hear a word of hope.

So what *can* we do for each other? Well, the only thing that helps: we can offer our presence, whatever that looks like. It’s sitting at a kitchen table; it’s mailing that card or dropping off that casserole; it’s sending the note that says you’re there; it’s that phone call, and the one after. When someone is not yet able to hear a word of hope, they can still be supported by a caring presence.

And I think about all this when I read our Gospel Lesson, because this story—on the road to Emmaus—is about two people who are grieving, and who are not yet ready to hear a word of hope.

The story takes place on Easter Sunday: “Now *on that same day*,” Luke writes, “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). Several women had visited the tomb, found it empty, met angelic messengers, and returned to tell the other followers of Jesus. But then the two disciples we meet this morning—they just left and started walking to the town of Emmaus.

It makes you wonder: what are they doing, and why? This isn’t the right time to be leaving Jerusalem. We might think they didn’t hear the reports of resurrection, that maybe that message hadn’t reached them? But no; as it turns out, they’ve heard all about the resurrection. In fact, they can recite the details: “Moreover,” they say, “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).

One of the puzzling parts of this story is not just how these two fail to recognize the Risen Christ; it's also how he doesn't just identify himself—that Jesus doesn't say (as he does in other Easter stories), 'Look! It's me!' (cf. John 20:27; Luke 24:39). But I think, in this story, we've got two people who are simply not ready to hear any word of hope. When they received reports of resurrection, they could only dismiss all that; then they meet the Risen Christ, "but"—as our Gospel Lesson puts it—"their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (v. 16). In a real sense, they are blinded by grief, because all they're able to recognize—at least, at this point in the story—is failure and loss.

So what does Jesus do for these grieving disciples on their way to Emmaus? Eventually, as the story unfolds, he'll teach about himself in the Scriptures and he'll open their eyes by the breaking of bread. That will come later, perhaps when they're ready... And that *later* part of the story is so dramatic that we can easily miss *what comes first*, what Jesus does for them while they're still blinded by grief, which in fact makes possible the rest of the story. And at first, Jesus does the only thing you can do for someone in grief: he gives them his presence. "While they were talking and discussing," it says, "Jesus himself came near and went with them" (v. 15).

"*Jesus himself came near and went with them*" (v. 15). There are certain verses in Scripture that contain, within themselves, almost a summary of the Gospel—and I think we find that here. Two heartbroken people are walking along a road, so "Jesus himself came near and went with them." This is the Risen Christ, God incarnate, the eternal Son in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19)—coming alongside sad, struggling people. This is God coming alongside human need.

And I find the language here really striking. Our translation has it that Jesus "went with them"—and that's fine...a little bland. You could translate the original language like this: "Jesus himself *drew near* [ἐγγίζω] and *began to journey with them* [συμπορεύομαι]" (Trenchard/Thayer). I find this amazing—and deeply moving—that here God draws near to journey with heartbroken people. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted" (34:18), says the psalmist—and I think we witness that, in narrative form, on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus—in this profound glimpse of the compassion of God—draws near to them, journeys with them, *and listens to them in their grief*: "And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' 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?'" (vv. 17-18). And then they talk about crucifixion, defeat, and death; so far, that's all they can really see; so far, their story is Good Friday without Easter.

Jesus listens, and then—as their journey together unfolds (and it was a very long walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus)—he starts leading them toward hope, with the Scriptures and the breaking of bread. And that's the part of the story we tend to remember—with the dramatic moment when they recognize the Lord. But again, that wonderful turn at the end—when these two discover the hope of Easter faith—that comes only *after* Jesus first draws near to them with compassion, only *after* Jesus journeys alongside them, only *after* Jesus listens to them with divine love.

When we first met them, those two disciples felt so defeated, they were unable to receive any word of hope, unable to absorb the reports of resurrection, unable even to recognize the Risen Christ. And what changed—what transformed them—was not at first the Scriptures and the breaking of bread; that came later, when they were ready; what first touched them and transformed them was the nearness of God in Christ, present to them in their grief.

That's why this story makes the hope of Easter more concrete and personal. This isn't some abstract hope; this is hope touching down in real lives—as the Risen Christ offers his presence, his nearness, to those who are brokenhearted.

And I think that, for us, the grace of this story is partly just how flawed these two disciples are: they hear reports of resurrection, but skip town; they meet the Risen Lord, but can't recognize him. They're flawed; they're able to see Good Friday but not Easter Sunday; they recognize defeat more than hope. But doesn't that just make them seem more relatable—more like us?

This story resonates with us because it's about two disciples who are flawed and struggling—and that could be any of us. And those two disciples, have you ever noticed what their names are? One is named Cleopas, but the other is...left unnamed! The tradition has often assumed they're both men, but that's not in the text; grammatically, the unnamed disciple could be a man or a woman. See, there's a space for you, for each of us, in this story: it's the story of Cleopas and [name], Cleopas and [name], on the road to Emmaus.

And God drawing near to us in our grief—this is something you've all experienced in different ways: that strength you didn't know you had; that kindness that came at just the right moment; that indescribable sense that—when you felt *almost* alone—God was nevertheless near.

And that experience, in our life of faith, is marked out here in Scripture—as part of the story of Easter. So when you likewise sense God's presence with you in the depths of your struggles, this same Easter story is still unfolding—with you as that unnamed disciple, and with Christ drawing near to journey *with you*. As we will sing: "I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey; but courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side" (Somerville). Amen.