

## **“On the Road with Jesus”**

**Luke 24:13-35**

**April 26, 2020**

### **The Road to Emmaus**

That same day two of [the followers of Jesus] were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. But they were not able to recognize who he was.

He asked, “What’s this you’re discussing so intently as you walk along?”

They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard what’s happened during the last few days?”

He said, “What has happened?”

They said, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn’t find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn’t see Jesus.”

Then he said to them, “So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can’t you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don’t you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?” Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.

They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on, but they pressed him: “Stay and have supper with us. It’s nearly evening; the day is done.” So, he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared.

Back and forth they talked. “Didn’t we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?”

They didn’t waste a minute. They were up and on their way back to Jerusalem. They found the Eleven and their friends gathered together, talking away: “It’s really happened! The Master has been raised up—Simon saw him!”

Then the two went over everything that happened on the road and how they recognized him when he broke the bread.

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

When walking in a labyrinth, I prefer to walk alone. As in ALL ALONE. I have been at retreats when everyone marches out together to the labyrinth to walk it. I don't like this AT ALL. I purposely lag behind and wait until folks have come and gone. I like to be BY MYSELF when walking the Road to Emmaus.

Imagine the scene the two disciple-types find themselves in just the week after Jesus is crucified. It is chaos among the ranks. Tears mix with fears mix with angry words and recriminations. Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, the women ran away from the tomb, the others had not the courage to go see the empty place for themselves.

Hunted they were, declared as enemies of both the Emperor and the Head Pharisees, cowering, hiding out, quaking in hidden upper rooms and storage bins out back. It is from this mixed bag of panic and sorrow and shock that we find two of the followers of Jesus booking it out of town, walking towards Emmaus, away from the immediate danger lurking in Jerusalem.

If this was me, I would want to walk alone, covered up in a cloak and mask (now that I have one), not wanting to call any attention to myself. I wouldn't want to be recognized or called out as "one of THEM, one of the Jesus freaks." I would want to walk the labyrinth of my grief alone.

If you have ever lost someone near to you, you know what I am talking about. While well-wishers are appreciated and needed, offers of service, food brought to your home, cards arriving in the mailbox, telephone calls and emails and texts and FaceBook posts and knocking at your door all starts to run together and at some point, you just want, you just NEED to be alone.

Alone with the loss. Alone with the silence. Alone with the grief, with the ugliness of your runny nose and the tears that just won't stop. Alone without your makeup,

alone without shaving your stubbled face, not caring what you are wearing or how clean it is or whether your shirt and pants match, alone in your pajamas, ALONE. Alone in your labyrinth of your new normal.

Given time, grief finally makes room for community, the need for an advocate, the need to go beyond our finite humanity into something or someone we need but don't fully understand. We get to the place where we can appreciate a friend who will just listen, a non-anxious, non-judgmental friend who accepts us in all our messiness, when we are decidedly NOT at our best, one who can take our cursing, crying, wailing, hurting curled-up-self away in our bed for as long as is needed.

Marlene Dietrich was a German-born actress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century famous for playing strong-willed women. Some of her better-known movies were "The Blue Angel" and "Shanghai Express" of the 1930s, "Witness for the Prosecution" in 1957 and "Judgment at Nuremberg" in 1961. She boasted a colorful love life and a take-no-prisoners approach to relationships. She died alone as a recluse at the age of 90, having been bedridden for some 11 years following an accident in Australia while she was performing in 1975.

Alone as she was, she had a few people who held close to her, trusted associates and family members. She said one time, "It's the friends you can call up at 4 a.m. that matter."

So true. The ones who will sit in silence with you. The ones who will bring you a hot cup of tea when your throat is raw from wretched crying. The ones who will answer your call at 4 a.m. with "What do you need? I'm here for you—I wasn't really sleeping anyway." The ones who will walk with you on the road to Emmaus...

Rev. Wendy Kidd talks back:

I'm not good at remembering names or recognizing people when I run into them outside of our normal circles. Neither of these is good as a pastor and a counselor. I just own it – usually with a bit of self-deprecating humor – and go on... Of course, it's generally not an issue when I've known someone for awhile and have developed a relationship with them.

I've always found it interesting that there are at least three different stories in the Gospels about individuals who didn't recognize Jesus – even though they'd spent the better part of three years with him. How does one not recognize someone with whom one has had a close relationship?

Sure, these two individuals on their way to Emmaus are grieving and confused... they aren't expecting to meet Jesus on the road – just as Mary Magdalene wasn't expecting to meet him in the garden outside the tomb. It's true: our eyes can play tricks on us.

Light entering your eyes and stimulating your retinas is just the first step in a long process of interpretation. As that information filters through your brain's circuits, different parts of the brain add their own input and interpretations onto what you see. This additional interpretation is mostly based on prior experience, even if it doesn't seem like it. Basically, the brain is making some decisions about how you see, and perhaps more importantly, how you interpret what you see. Most of this processing takes place in the occipital lobe, at the very back of your brain. Once the visual information gets there, it gets integrated with your previous experiences and intuition – it's like a "database" in your brain that helps you know. Your eyes relay information to your occipital lobe, which combines that real-time information with previous knowledge to figure out the world around you.

Now, most of the time, the assumptions that your brain makes are fine. For example, objects that are smaller are usually farther away and the horizon is usually flat. These are reasonable assumptions for your brain to make, and they're reinforced by almost every situation you encounter. But sometimes, the information from your eyes doesn't agree with what your brain's experience tells you should be going on. Then something strange, and amazing, happens: Your brain ignores your eyes! While your occipital lobe does a lot of work in vision, processing and making sense of the information that comes in from your eyes, your brain is so powerful that it can override the direct input from your eyes – mostly because that input is only a small fraction of what you're actually seeing. (Sciencenonfiction.org, "Seeing Isn't Believing," 2015)

This makes far more sense to me as an explanation for why the disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus. They weren't expecting to see him on the road, so their brains overrode the direct input from their eyes – until that moment when Jesus spoke and acted in a way that was familiar to them in the breaking of the bread.

Like these two disciples who were trying to make sense of what had happened over the past week since Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, we've been trying to make sense of what has happened in the midst of this pandemic. Like them, we've been on an emotional roller coaster. Like them, we've been trying to make sense of it all. And perhaps, like them, we haven't recognized Jesus' presence with us... especially when we've felt isolated and alone...

The disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't experience Christ through proof, or knowledge, or information, but through the opening of their hearts to the one who met them – where they were, as they were, on their journey. In the opening of the scriptures, the welcoming of the stranger, and the breaking of the bread, they were changed, and they returned to Jerusalem as witnesses.

I see this story to be true regarding the nature of God and of our lives. I don't really care whether it's factual or historical, because it resonates with the realities of our lives and God's presence. What I know for sure is that, when I'm walking the Emmaus road, Jesus is beside me even when I can't recognize him. He is present in my spouse with whom I share meals. He is present in the friend that I FaceTime with almost daily. He is present in the warmth of the sun and the gently falling rain, the tulips and the daffodils, the chipmunks and the rabbits and the birds. He is present in the strangers wearing masks and keeping physical distance at the grocery store.

Our faith in God, embodied in Jesus, doesn't really silence life's persistent questions: "What's going to happen next?" "Will life return to 'normal'?" The questions will always chatter away at us. But faith is the assurance that we can face the unknown, the mysteries of this life. And it's all the richer because we walk the road together – even when we're physically apart – with the one who comes to us sometimes as a stranger. END

Epilogue:

Wendy has reminded us that Jesus is there with us on our journey though we may have trouble recognizing him. That's why I put up these Flat Jesus images in the background today. If you remember nothing else from today's service, remember the image of Jesus walking alongside you on your own personal road to Emmaus.

The awakening to God and Jesus and Spirit is not your responsibility or doing; awakening happens when your subconscious mind and your yearning heart reach for something outside your physical reality. The awakening is not your responsibility and there is nothing you can do to coax it into being. The RESPONSE is yours—that's where the Spirit invites you, at 4 am and 2:39 am and 1:17 pm and all the times in between, into a sacred conversation, into a holy union.

What if I told you Flat Jesus had been on this screen all along, all these many weeks now, but your eyes have only been opened to him this morning? Would you believe me? Could you believe me?

I say "yes." Jesus and Spirit and God have been there all along and they will continue to be here for you for all the rest of your days. You have been awakened to their presence now. NOW is your time to respond. NOW is your time to call on them when you are lying awake in anxiety at 4 am. Your pain IS your awakening. Your sleeplessness IS your invitation. The "Shelter at Home" directive is your Road to Emmaus, your long and often solitary walk away from the craziness and busyness and incomprehensible cruelty of your own personal Jerusalem.

You have friends on this walk—some you can see and recognize, some you can see but not recognize for who they truly are for you, and some who are content to merely be by your side, day and night, night after night, day after day, invisible, and invisible to time or place or convenience or distraction.

In ancient wisdom, the way to an awakened heart is through a broken one. Covid-19 has broken the world's heart, this is true. As of today, more than 200,000 people have died from the virus—one fourth of those in the US alone-- and many researchers say it is just getting started. That's 200,000 victims multiplied by all the people grieving and in shock over the sudden loss of their loved ones and all the people affected otherwise by degrees of separation.

Our tendency is to try to block out the pain and brokenness of life, shielding ourselves off from others as we walk the Road to Emmaus, pretending just like the disciples who grieve their fallen Jesus, that the worst thing imaginable has not really happened in the world. We stand socially distanced, determined to keep the hurt far, far away.

This of course, does not really work. Running away does not cure the problem. Denying the fear and anger and anxiety only tables it for a time until it comes roaring back in spades, threatening to take your very breath away.

However if we let the pain in, if we breathe it deep as in the tongen way of Buddhist mindfulness practice, and hold it there in our lungs, we feel our heart expand, expand wide enough to hold all our pain along with the brokenness of the world, too. Then we are AWARE. We are AWAKE. Then we recognize Jesus who is walking with us, Spirit who is walking with us, God-Alive who is loving the sacredness of the union of unconditional love.

Then shall we breathe out, carefully, mindfully, sighing out the world's agony. The product of our exercise is compassion. We feel compassion, not guardedness. We feel compassion, not distraction. We walk the labyrinth of our lives and notice then each blade of grass and each stone out of place yet perfectly placed just where nature wants it to be. With each turn to a new direction on the pre-planned path, we become less anxious about where it is all going and more aware that although we are at first

comprehension all alone, we are actually companioned by the sun, the breeze, the dirt and grass, stones and twigs, the life above and below the surface of the ground, and the communion of saints and spirits walking with us. Walking with us. Walking with us on our Road to Emmaus.

*May It Be So.*

At UCC Parker Hilltop: We exist as a church because we believe the Good News of Jesus Christ: that God's unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives meaning and purpose to our lives.  
Come as you are, for you are enough.