

Third Sunday in Easter
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116; Luke 24:13-35
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“Now on that same day two disciples were going to a village called Emmaus...” For many Christians, the story told of this resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus is a favorite. This may be because we can see ourselves in Cleopas and the other unnamed disciple. They seem like ordinary or just folks. Cleopas is only mentioned here in Luke so we know next to nothing else about him or his earlier association with Jesus except that he was a follower.

Emmaus is problematic because there didn't seem to be a place called Emmaus within seven miles of Jerusalem as Luke tells us. There was an Emmaus some 23 kilometers away, but that is twice as far. What if Emmaus were any place we go to escape reality, to forget, run away or to seek pity for ourselves?

These two disciples are leaving Jerusalem – the location of Jesus' arrest, trial and death. We can hear their despair as they talk to a stranger on the road. Ironically, they ask if he is the only one who doesn't know what happened when, in fact, Jesus is the only one who does know what really happened. They continue, “But we had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel. Yes and, besides, this is now the third day since these things took place.”

We know that most of the disciples are still in Jerusalem, but these two appear to be giving up. They are headed away. Three days was long enough for them. We can relate. Our hopes and dreams can sometimes be easily dashed as well. We can retreat to the mall or the refrigerator or the liquor cabinet, the golf course, garage, office or trout stream when the going gets rough. Yet even as these two are walking away, they are followed and found by one who appears to them as a stranger at first.

Some of you know my story of growing up in the Congregational Church in New England. I like to say that religion just didn't take with me. Once away from home and in college, I was greatly relieved that I never had to go to church again. In fact, I took an evolution course in hopes of proving to myself that God didn't exist. I thought I wanted to be an atheist, and I was trying with all my might to be free from what I saw as the shackles of religion. You might say that I was walking away from Jerusalem.

The so-called “hippie movement” of the '60s and '70s had a lot of appeal to me, with its utopian vision, energetic protest of an unjust war and an unfair society and its music.

This sustained me for a while, but I eventually lost hope in the people I shared the dream with. People are always the problem, aren't they?

All this time, I had a nagging feeling that I was being pursued. Someone, some thing was trailing me and trying to get my attention. I fought it and ran for British Columbia, my Emmaus, in the summer after my junior year at the University of Rhode Island. Like most epic journeys to leave home, I ended up back home shortly before classes were to begin for my senior year. A quick and unexpected trip to Philadelphia with an old flame, a chance encounter with Jesus disguised as a street person and again as a Baptist Bible school student, led me to seek God as a last resort. "If you are for real, I want to know you." The rest, as they say, is history. I joined the Episcopal Church shortly after that at age 20 and have missed church five times in the last 42 years.

I would later describe God as "The Hound of Heaven," the title of a poem by Frances Thompson. Someone said that "Jesus doesn't demand of us newness of life but rather confers newness of life upon us." We may not seek God, but God seeks us as he did the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Our text this morning lays the groundwork for the liturgy of the mass, the Holy Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. The first half of the service is called **The Word of God**. Initially we hear the Bible read, and we listen to some exposition on it in the sermon. The second half is **The Holy Communion**, at which time ancient prayers from the mouth of Jesus by an ordained clergy person prepare us to encounter the Son in bread and wine.

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" And, "When he was at 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."

Jesus has vanished from our sight except as we know him when we hear and study scripture, break bread together and discover him in friends and strangers who walk these roads of life with us.

Madeline L'Engle, a Christian author, once wrote about the night her husband, Hugh, proposed to her. He had taken her to their favorite restaurant and then back to his house. He put on a recording of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" and they talked. Eventually he took out a book of poetry and found a poem by Conrad Aiken. He read Madeline these words: "Music I heard with you was more than music, and bread I broke with you was more than bread." Then he asked her to marry him.

When Christ has opened our eyes, our hearts and our minds, when we've known resurrection in our own lives, the music is more than music, the bread is more than bread, the Bible is more than a book, the natural world radiates with the glory of God, and every person is more than just another face.

Oh, that we could live on this plane of existence all the time. In fact, we ordinary people, like Cleopas and the other disciple, seem to have only occasional glimpses of that other worldliness, but enough so we know it exists.

Cleopas and the other disciple are so convinced of the greater reality they have encountered that they head straight back to Jerusalem. Once there, now with the others, immediately after our text ends today, Jesus appears to all of them. Before he ascends to heaven, he tells them to stay together and wait for the power from on high. For Luke this will be in 50 days when the Holy Spirit descends on them on the Day of Pentecost.

We too must stick together in Jerusalem or in the church, where we will more likely experience Christ in the Word and the Communion, in the fellowship of believers. It is also here where we will be empowered and inspired to lose ourselves for the sake of others.

The choice is ours – Jerusalem or Emmaus? Either way, One we know or don't recognize is always close at hand urging us back to the road that leads to larger life. AMEN.