

Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2017
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Road to Emmaus

Where is Emmaus? And where is the road that leads to it? As I was doing research for this sermon, I decided I wanted to locate it on a map. Turns out that we can't find it, or haven't discovered it yet. Scholars have four locations that they think are possible to be the town that the two disciples in our story were walking to after Jesus' execution. Archeological digs are being conducted, time is passing, and intellectual arguments are being made. All of that is good. Exploration is important. But until we know, and, even after we know the specific geographic location, we can always claim the road to Emmaus as our road. It is the road to recognizing Christ among us, beside us, walking with us. It is the road of life. The road is unique to each of us. It is smooth and rough, gravelly and sandy, strewn with rocks and often muddy. It is occasionally covered by shade trees and each day the light of dawn shines upon it.

In our gospel today two people, Cleopas and another are walking to Emmaus, walking away from Jerusalem and the horror they have experienced. They are rightly traumatized and they are talking about what has happened. I wondered about the person accompanying Cleopas who is not named. Current biblical scholars think that because the person is not named that may indicate the person is a woman or a child who was not of age. Some scholars think it was Mary, Cleopas's wife who stayed at the foot of the cross. Others argue that it may have been Cleopas's son Simeon. Regardless, as they are walking along the road, another person, that "their eyes were kept from recognizing" approaches them, and asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stop in their tracks, faces steeped in grief. I'm not sure I would have welcomed a stranger along the road after what they had been through.

But the gospel story says that Cleopas answers him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" I hear a tinge of anger and pathos in that answer, don't you? They must have been incredulous that there was anyone, anywhere that didn't know that the person they had hoped would be the one to redeem Israel had been handed over by the chief priests to be condemned and crucified. Jesus was someone they loved, how could this stranger not know? It would be like any of us not being aware of state-sponsored executions in Arkansas this past week. Maybe you've been out of the country, but if you were in town you certainly heard about the executions. And maybe you heard that one of the prisoners, Ledell Lee, requested the eucharist as his last meal.

So Cleopas and his companion are stunned by the stranger's ignorance of current events and begin to explain everything that has happened in the prior two days and the details of what had happened that very morning—that some of the women in their group found angels at Jesus' tomb instead of his body.

At that point the stranger engages in the conversation, still walking along the road. He talks with them about scripture, he teaches them, interpreting what the prophets had said about the Messiah. Wow. Can you imagine? When I was in seminary, there were teachers whose volume and depth of knowledge astounded me. After a class of full-blown lecture, I wanted to sit in a silent, cool, white room or float in a sensory deprivation tank and try to absorb a tenth of what was taught to me. Now, here was Cleopas and his companion, traumatized, defeated and for all they knew hunted, and a stranger was walking with them and teaching them. I don't know how they were standing up! Except that what the stranger was teaching them was hope—joyful, promised hope that the scriptures had been fulfilled, just not in the way they imagined.

And so when they reach the village, this thoughtful, gracious, stranger, allows them the opportunity to go home. He was going on before them. But they, out of concern for him, call him back and urge that he come with them because night is falling. They were worried about him. Surely, the stranger smiled. They were hungry for his words of hope and knowledge of the promises of scripture. Then, at the table, at the breaking of the bread, the fullness of the stranger's resurrected identity was revealed. They recognized Jesus and knew the longed for miracle was true.

So what do they do then? They rush out, that same hour, into the night that they were afraid of earlier. They found their way back to Jerusalem and joyfully confirmed with the others who had been locked in a room together, that Jesus lives.

Jesus is always on the road with us, sometimes we are aware and welcome him, sometimes he walks ahead of us to prepare the way. Sometimes we cannot see him, our head and eyes, which are tuned to secularity, cannot discern his presence. But he is always with us. Jesus is revealed in the breaking of the bread in our story. He is continually revealed to us, and our ability to recognize him grows each time we approach the Eucharistic table. It is a precious, miraculous, loving gift, as we gather at the altar rail to receive the bread and wine, and consume the gifts of God.

Fredrick Buechner, noted Presbyterian preacher, now in his 90's writes:

"To believe that Christ is risen and alive in the world is to believe that there is no person or place or thing in the world through which we ourselves may not be made more alive by his life, and whenever we are made more alive, whenever we are made more brave and strong and beautiful, we may be sure that Christ is present with us even though more often than not our eyes, like the two disciples eyes, are kept from recognizing him."¹

I'd like to leave you with this story: I have found it a great blessing to offer the gifts of God to this community and to each of you. Recently, one of our youngest members of the congregation patiently waited for me to offer him the chalice as he held the communion wafer in his little hands. When I reached him, he eagerly dunked the wafer, and most of his fingers, into the wine. Dripping, physically and spiritually, with joy, he quickly put it into his mouth and he looked up, eyes shining, and smiled. Jesus lives. He is revealed in the breaking of the bread. He is on the road with us and before us. We are invited to immerse our lives in the love of Christ. Alleluia.

¹ Fredrick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 2006. Harper Collins. New York. p, 256.