



“Where is Emmaus?”
Scripture – Luke 24:13-35
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 4, 2014

The Emmaus story has captured the imagination of Christians for centuries. An impressive line up of artists, including Caravaggio and Titian, have tried their hand at depicting this story on canvas. But I am drawn to Rembrandt who was fascinated with the story. He painted Jesus and his two followers walking the road to Emmaus, he painted the supper at Emmaus twice – when he was in his early twenties, then again in middle age – and in a fourth portrayal of the story, he even depicted the moment when Christ vanished from their sight.

We celebrated the resurrection of Jesus two weeks ago, but as we take up today’s passage, the story has progressed only a few hours. After the women discover the tomb empty and run to tell the 11 remaining apostles, Luke switches to another scene. It is Easter afternoon, and two followers of Jesus, who are not among the 11, are headed out of Jerusalem making a seven-mile trek to a village called Emmaus. Like most people who are stunned by the sudden loss of a loved one, they are trying to make sense of what has happened.

As many sitting here can testify, the sudden loss of a loved one can shatter our world. The grief can be so overwhelming that our minds struggle to comprehend the disaster that has struck us. We repeat the same words to each new person who appears at our door: “I cannot believe it.” We convey our astonishment repeatedly because we have not entirely absorbed the calamity. Someone who has always been a major part of our life is suddenly gone, and it seems unreal. Do you know that feeling? I cannot count the number of times I have been with people soon after an unexpected loss and they have said, “I feel like this is just a bad dream.”

There is a part of us that acknowledges the terrible loss, but another part denies it. I suspect our psyche is shielding us from the full force of the blow. If we were to thoroughly accept the dreadful news all at once, it would crush us, so we absorb the tragedy one frame at a time.

Perhaps this describes the state of mind of these two followers of Jesus heading to Emmaus. They say to one another, “Can you believe it? Everything seemed to be on an upswing. The future was so promising! Jesus was clearly a prophet and I was convinced that he was the one to redeem our people. I just cannot believe he is really gone.”

While our heart is in denial, a section of our brain is trying to process exactly what has happened. Our heart is saying, “No, this cannot be,” but our mind feels compelled to nail down the facts. So we find ourselves spelling out exactly what happened. “I was at home on the computer responding to some emails. I had just opened one inviting us to a dinner party when the phone rang. The person on the phone asked my name. I thought it was

another solicitation for a contribution. I was getting ready to hang up, but then the person said, ‘I have some very bad news.’”

The two walking to Emmaus may have been experiencing something similar. Our passage says they were “talking with each other about all these things that had happened.” They were recounting the events of the past few days in detail. It is as if they are saying, “I’m not losing my mind, am I? These things really happened, right?” A sudden loss is disorienting and these two are struggling to get their bearing after suffering a devastating jolt.

Considering how quickly the tide turned against Jesus – the lightening speed with which the authorities seized him and killed him – his followers must have been in shock. They must have been devastated by the obliteration of their dreams.

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you felt as if you had no future? Like a volcano, your life erupted with the end of your marriage or a frightening diagnosis or the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. Your dreams suddenly evaporated and you could not envision anything good to come.

Jesus comes to the two walkers in their sorrow. They are suffering the loss of their Teacher who had shown them the path to a rich and adventuresome life. They had never known such a complete person; such a wise person; such a spirit-filled person. Devastated by his death, they are trying to piece together their lives. What do they do now? They have lost their guide. His crucifixion buried their joy, buried their hope and buried their purpose.

I picture these two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus conversing with one another and struggling to comprehend. Luke says that while they were discussing the sudden turn of events, Jesus came near and walked along with them and Luke adds this cryptic phrase: “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Why didn’t they recognize him? Some suggest that they never looked directly at Jesus when he began to walk along beside them. Heads down, looking at the dusty road three feet ahead, they were commiserating with one another over the disaster that had befallen them. A short time before, they were riding a wave of exhilaration. The crowds surrounding Jesus were swelling daily as his teachings struck a chord with everyone who was open to a fresh word. Then, a few days after they arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the nightmare struck.

I have no doubt these two were in a fog, feeling overwhelmed by their catastrophe, but I cannot see how that would prevent them from recognizing Jesus. They knew his face, the color of his hair and the sound of his voice. But somehow, they did not see.

These two followers spill out their story, telling Jesus what had happened to their fallen leader. But as they are spelling out the details, Jesus interrupts. Beginning with Moses and the prophets, he teaches them what the Scriptures said about the Messiah. Even if these two had not recognized Jesus before now, surely they would recognize him after his Bible lesson. But, no, they still have no clue who has joined them.

The three reach Emmaus and it appears the stranger is going further, but they urge him to stay with them. They still do not know who he is, but they are attracted to him. Finally, when they sit down for a meal together, the scales fall from their eyes and they realize that the stranger is Jesus. Then, without skipping a beat, the text says, “and he vanished from their sight.”

This intriguing story is found only in the Gospel of Luke. The author of Luke’s Gospel was not simply documenting a story he had uncovered. He was writing to the second and third generation of Christians – people

who had never seen Jesus – and he was wrestling with a question all followers of Christ have encountered. How does Jesus Christ come to us?

It is fascinating that neither archaeologists nor Biblical scholars have ever been able to locate the village of Emmaus. We know where most of the towns and villages in the Bible are located. Name a spot and you can pinpoint it on a map of the ancient world. But not Emmaus. The precise location of this village eludes us.

Could it be because Emmaus represents not a physical place, not a literal village, but rather, where healing occurs?

Frederick Buechner says that Emmaus is where we go or what we do in order to escape the problems and pain of the world. Emmaus could be a movie or a bar; it could be buying something new or mindlessly surfing the internet. He says that Emmaus is “wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred; that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas about love and freedom and justice have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.”¹

Could it be that the walk to Emmaus represents the grief journey we take when we suffer a significant loss? That chapter of our lives when we are struggling to make sense of what has happened? That road we walk when we express our tears, our anger, our frustration and our despair?

Theologian Barbara Lundblad says that “this is not just a story about two disciples on the road to Emmaus two thousand years ago. There are two disciples. One was named Cleopas. (Did you notice that the other is not named?) The other is you. Or me. Luke left a blank space for us to fill in our own names. All our hopelessness is there on the road, every broken-down dream, every doubt we’ve ever had or still have. Are you waiting for a clearer revelation, for deeper assurance of Jesus’ presence in your life?”² All of us would like that, wouldn’t we?

Yet our experience is like that of the two in our passage. Occasionally, our blinders are pulled away and we perceive Christ’s presence. But as quickly as he appeared, he vanishes. New Testament scholar, Alan Culpepper says “God’s presence is always elusive...(always) at the edge of our awareness...it is never constant, steady or predictable...we perceive God’s presence in fleeting moments.”³

The risen Lord meets us in the ordinary places and the routine experiences of our lives. Emmaus is when the scales fall from our eyes and we recognize that healing is occurring. Emmaus is that point when we are able to look back and realize that Jesus has been walking beside us during our grief, helping to heal us step by step. We now see that Jesus appeared in the neighbor who brought dinner; the church member who wrote a beautiful sympathy note; the friend who came over and simply listened as we poured out our sadness. And our risen Lord speaks to us through the promise of Scripture that after death is resurrection.

Emmaus is where the darkness lifts, where bitter feelings are replaced by cherished memories and where our despair is transformed into hope.

NOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: Seabury, 1966), p. 85-86.
2. Barbara Lundblad, “Moving and Standing Still,” *Day1.org*, April 28, 1996.
3. R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 482.