

Met on the Emmaus Road¹
Luke 24: 13-35
Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 24: 13-35

Now on that same day 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. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 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?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, 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." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the 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. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away,

¹ Some material in this sermon was previously preached as "Serving at Tables" at The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary chapel service on August 13, 2014.

everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

A lot of the Gospel stories happen on the road, have you noticed? People are always journeying from somewhere to somewhere else. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem for the census. The parable of the Good Samaritan happens on the road. Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well because he is traveling through her area. Jesus sets his eyes on Jerusalem in Luke, Chapter Nine, and spends the next eleven chapters traveling there.

We will hear more about roads in the next few weeks, as our journey with Jesus continues. There is something about travel that allows for possibilities. Maybe it's that we all travel on the roads, rich and poor alike, and we are all subject to the risks of the road. Maybe it's that travel means that you are no longer where you started, and you're not yet where you're going. You're somewhere in between.

Our scene is set on the same day as the women's discovery of the empty tomb. This is still the original Easter Sunday. Cleopas and another disciple, who I believe was Cleopas' wife, are walking seven miles back home to Emmaus from Jerusalem. One of the reasons that I suspect the other disciple was Cleopas' wife is that we find out later in the story that they share a home.

We don't know why they're going home at this point. Maybe they fear for their lives, since Jesus has been executed. Or, more likely, I believe, they've just decided that this whole Jesus thing was nice. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, but, after his death, they don't hope that any more. It's been nice, but now it's over, and it's time to get on with their lives now.

Jesus joins them as they are walking on the road, but they do not recognize him. He asks them what they're talking about. They cannot believe that he hasn't heard, but they tell him the story of Jesus' ministry and his death, and the early reports of the empty tomb.

I can hear Jesus shaking his head here. He cannot believe that they don't get it. He starts teaching them the context of the story that they told him. He starts with Moses and the prophets, and explains how all these things were foretold. A seven-mile journey likely took them two and a half hours, and, in that time, he explains the whole thing to them.²

As Jesus is still talking, they get to Emmaus, and Jesus walks ahead like he's going on, but Cleopas and his wife invite him to stay at their house that night. It's nearly evening, and nobody wants to be traveling on the roads at night. There are bandits on the road, and other predators, as well as simply the dangers of missteps in the dark. They talk him into staying, which I don't imagine was all that difficult.

When they all sit down to dinner, Jesus steps into the host's role, as he has a habit of doing. He reaches out, takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. This must have been very familiar. It is exactly what he did at the table at the Last Supper, just a few days ago. This is one of their last memories of Jesus.

Cleopas' and his wife's eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus. He disappears from their sight – they don't get to ask him any more questions. They look at each other, and they look at the empty seat where Jesus had been sitting. They look at each other, and they look at the bread on the table. They look at each other.

They say to each other, "Weren't our hearts burning within us when he was talking on the road, and opening the Scriptures to us?" It was just like listening to Jesus used to be...

² Average human walking speed varies between about 2.8 and 3.1 mph.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preferred_walking_speed.

They immediately get up and they brave the dark to walk the two and a half hours back to Jerusalem. There they find the rest of the disciples gathered together. Tradition says that the Upper Room where the Last Supper was held became the disciple's headquarters until Pentecost. The other disciples tell them that Jesus has risen from the dead, and appeared to Simon Peter.

Cleopas and his wife say, "You ain't heard nothing yet." They tell the rest of Jesus' disciples what happened to them, and how they recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread.

I make a reference to this story every time I celebrate the Lord's Supper at this table. Every time I invite you to the table, I say, "According to the Gospel, when our risen Lord was at table with his disciples, he took the bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

I make reference to it because it is important. We are all on a journey. We are not where we started. With a few exceptions, we are not little kids.

We are not where we are going. If you look around you, you will see that, while we may get glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven, we're not there yet. We're on the road between.

Tolkien said that,

"The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.

And whither then? I cannot say.”³

We do not know exactly where this road will take us on the way. But we know that Jesus will walk with us, even if we don't recognize him.

We know that, if we let him, Jesus will open our hearts to God's truth.

The other thing that we know is that eating together changes things. When we eat together from a common meal, we are all on the same level. We are not these people here and those people over there. We're not those people up there and these people down here. We are all humans together. There is a reason that every family I know, when we get together, we eat together.

It has nothing to do with what the food or drink is, it has to do with eating and drinking it together. Reverend Landon Whitsett, a well-known Presbyterian pastor and provocateur, claims that he has experienced every benefit ever promised to him from the Lord's Supper through shared church coffee.⁴ I won't go quite that far. I will not call eating together a sacrament, but I tell you that, when we eat and drink together in community, it is sacramental. Christ did not spell it out as a separate commandment, but I believe he assumed it. On Maundy Thursday, he commanded that, whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we do it in remembrance of him. That means that we are gathering together to eat and drink together.

I can tell you that, when we eat together as Christians, the Holy Spirit becomes visible in that community of people around the table. It becomes “a visible sign of the invisible grace of God.”⁵ Those of you who were part of the Lenten class saw this benefit in our meals together at

³ Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 2015., Book 1, Chapter 1.

⁴ Public Facebook conversation, July 19, 2014. Permission to quote granted via private message.

⁵ The Tridentine Creed (mid-16th century), paraphrasing Augustine.

the long table in the church kitchen. That may well have been as much of a benefit as the book and discussions in the sanctuary. Those of you who were not, well, you missed out, but I promise that we will create more opportunities.

We live in a nation of growing social isolation, a nation of people “Bowling Alone.”⁶ Book after book, news story after news story, report that all the traditional community organizations are graying and getting smaller and smaller. People in the United States are dying for some kind of genuine community, even as they retreat behind their locked doors, their security systems, and their electronic screens.

So, what do we do?

Pay attention to the people journeying with you on this journey called life. They may have much to teach you, even if you do not recognize them as your teacher.

When we gather as a family, and as a community, when we eat together, it is then that our eyes can be opened and we can see Jesus in our midst. So, I beg of you, when you get those opportunities to eat together, to come together in community, don't miss out! Take all the opportunities you can get!

For that is how we can not only see, but experience Jesus Christ in our midst.

AMEN.

⁶ Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.