

April 30, 2017

“*The Road to Emmaus*”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 24:13-35

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Two men are walking down an Indiana country road, chatting with one another, when they come across a neighboring farmer just standing out in the middle of his field doing absolutely nothing... just standing there. He's completely still, arms folded, not moving at all. The men, thinking it strange and wondering what's happening, walk out to the farmer and ask him, "Excuse us, but is everything okay?" "Oh, yes," the farmer assures them. "I'm just trying to win a Nobel Prize." "A Nobel Prize?" ask the men, confused. "How?" To which the farmer answered, "Well, I heard they give the Nobel Prize to people who are '*out standing*' in their field." Get it... out standing in their field. Okay, so it's corny, but what do you expect from an Indiana farm girl turned preacher. Yet it's not the worst way to introduce today's Scripture about two men walking down a country road, chatting with each other about the stunning developments that occurred in Jerusalem the previous few days, when, suddenly, who appears before them, but the One who truly is the most *outstanding* among us all. The risen Lord himself, Jesus Christ!

Now this text is really a suggestive story in the sense that the two men are heading down the road of life the wrong way. That is, until Jesus turns them around and heads them the right way. Let that metaphor resonate with you as we consider what this scripture means for us. Let's look at three key elements of this story. First, the men are grieving. Life has just hit them hard. Not only had their beloved teacher and friend died, but so did their expectations and their hopes. So when Jesus asks them, "What are you discussing with each other", they stop and stand there, looking sad, feeling so discouraged. "We had hoped he was the one!" And, doesn't that describe us when life hits us hard in one way or another – feeling discouraged, alone, hopeless. The second thing is, they don't recognize the living Lord right beside them. And, how often have we been in that exact place – unable to see God beside us. You know, on Easter Sunday, I quoted Bishop Willimon. Listen again to his wonderful words: "When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, time and time again we look up and realize that we're not walking by ourselves. When we come to some dead end in life, when we look over the brink, into the dark abyss, we will find to our surprise and delight, that He is there, awaiting us, a light in the darkness of this world." And yet, isn't it true that, like the men walking to Emmaus, sometimes we can focus too much on our problems or situations, and we don't recognize that Christ is there, with us, always. And third, the men just don't get the promises and the meaning of what God is giving us through scripture. That is, until Jesus connects the dots for them. And that's when their hearts began to

burn within them. And this last point is very important for us. We have to understand and trust that God's promises are relevant to our lives, so that we can find the hope and strength and comfort and guidance we need to get through our difficult times.

Let's go back to the story. These men are surprised that this "stranger" is asking them what happened in Jerusalem because everyone else in the region knew. So they appease him and tell him all that's taken place. As they relate the story, Jesus quickly sees just how limited, how shallow, how narrow their understanding is of the true purpose of his ministry and his death. And Jesus actually admonishes the men, "Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe." So Jesus begins to instruct them about what the Scriptures say. Now can't you just imagine how good a Bible study that was, with Jesus leading it? He starts with Moses, and he takes them through the prophets, and all the Scriptures pointing to himself. I can just imagine him telling them about the Passover lamb, three thousand years earlier, that was sacrificed to save the Israelites, and how the Messiah – Jesus – was the Lamb of God sacrificed to save the world. I can hear him quoting from the prophet Micah – "From you, Bethlehem will be the one to go for me, the one whose origins are from the days of eternity," and they remember the town where Jesus was born. I can imagine Jesus talking about Jonah, and they remember him saying, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." And then, from Isaiah, saying, "He was wounded for our transgressions, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his wounds we are healed." And they remember the scourging and crucifixion.

And as the two men begin to gain new insight into what God was doing for the salvation of the world, the Scriptures suddenly come alive for them. They begin to see how God was at work, how God had a plan for humanity, how those promises could apply to their lives, how there was hope after all. And unexpectedly their hearts began to burn within them. Now think about yourself a minute. When have you had a burning in your heart? When you were first in love? When your children were born? When you reached some goal or achievement you worked really hard to attain? And don't those times of such personal significance make our hearts burn in us with a joyful fullness. And these men were feeling this "burning" for God. So they invite Jesus, still unrecognizable, in to stay and eat a simple meal with them. And this is when their eyes were finally opened and they recognized Christ. This is when they were transformed and became so enthused, so filled with joy, that the Bible tells us "they left that very hour," and went the seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples about Jesus appearing to them.

But now let me pause, and ask you a question. Why do think Jesus didn't tell the men who he was? Why didn't he just say, "Hey, it's me – your friend, Jesus! I'm alive! Here's my hands, my feet, my side, to prove it?" Well, because maybe Jesus knew there would soon be a time when he would not be physically at their side. He would ascend to his rightful place in heaven, and then they... and you and me, would have to learn how to see him, how to recognize him, around us, and in us. Because he is truly all around us, but we have to be aware. There's a simple, yet beautiful poem you may have heard, that speaks to this.

The man whispered, "God, speak to me."
And a meadowlark sang.
But the man did not hear.
So the man yelled, "God, speak to me!"
And the thunder rolled across the sky.
But the man did not listen.
The man looked around and said, "God, let me see you."
And a star shone brightly.
But the man did not notice.
And the man shouted, "God, show me a miracle!"
And a life was born.
But the man did not know.
So, the man cried out in despair.
"Touch me God, and let me know that you are here!"
Whereupon God reached down and touched the man.
But the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

And that describes those disciples. Walking on down the road - going the wrong way. Walking the road of sorrow, grief and despair. And they're so preoccupied and self-absorbed and blinded by their pain, trying to rationalize, analyze and question what's happened, that they fail to recognize Jesus. They fail to see him as the one who can bring about hope and new life. They fail to see him as the one who has a plan and purpose and can cause all things to work together for good. They fail to see him as the one they can trust, who has power over everything, including death itself. And doesn't that describe us? Don't we often get so caught up in our problems and pain that we fail to see Jesus, to trust Jesus. So we keep going down the road the wrong way.

That's why Jesus said to those disciples, "O how slow of heart you are." You see, they knew what he had done and taught. And as his disciples, they probably lived good lives, doing what they were supposed to do – going to the temple, teaching their children about God, maybe even serving on a committee or two. You can identify with that, can't you? But there was something missing. They had religion all right, but not a relationship. They had information about Jesus, but not an intimacy with Jesus. They had a handle on Jesus, but not a heart for Jesus. And only a heart for Jesus will be able to recognize the power, the comfort, the peace, the joy, the love that Jesus can bring us.

Someday Christ will return in a blaze of glory. Until then, however, he comes in the ordinary and everyday. For consider, Mary recognized Jesus in the simple saying of her name. Thomas recognized Jesus by scars on his body. The disciples recognized Jesus while they were at work fishing. These men recognized Jesus in sharing a meal. So the message for us is to look for Christ in all the simple things we do each and every day.

What road of life are you walking today? What direction are you going? As you hear this wonderful story, don't you want that same enthusiasm and joyfulness for Jesus in your life as those men had? Then open your eyes, your hearts, and invite him in, just like those men did. And trust me, you'll find yourself going in the right direction, and having that kind of excitement that makes you want to run and shout, Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!