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Luke 24:13-35

Your Road to Emmaus

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I want to share with you an interesting little factoid. Can anyone tell me what's the fastest growing religious group in the country? Any guesses? Okay I'll tell you. It's the 'nones'. That's right... the 'nones.' Not, N-U-N, like Mother Teresa the nun, but N-O-N-E. You see, nowadays, if somebody is asked their religious affiliation, almost a quarter of the U.S. population answers... "none." I bring this up because at our Leadership Team meeting last Monday night we looked at some of the demographics of Falmouth and Cape Cod. Now these statistics are important, because as disciples of Jesus Christ, he calls us to go out and make new disciples. So it makes sense to know who we're dealing with, right? And these statistics tell us that even though fifty percent of the people in Falmouth describe themselves as spiritual, only twenty percent feel attending worship is necessary. Now I'm not going to wear you down with data, but I did find it interesting, because, as we all know, at some point in our lives, we will go through difficult times. Isn't that true? And I really believe that when someone doesn't make Jesus Christ an integral part of their life, they can easily end up feeling exactly like those two people we heard about in today's scripture walking down the road to Emmaus - afraid, sad, hopeless, fearful for their future.

Now many people say they see and experience God in a sunset, or walking along the ocean, or working in their garden. So do I! Appreciating nature gives honor to our Creator God. But, as I just indicated, life gets in the way, things happen. And then, let me ask, are those "nones" or the "spiritual," going to get any strength from a sunset, any words of comfort from the ocean, or any forgiveness from a flower. No. Only Jesus Christ can say, "Come to me you who are weary and burdened. And I will give you rest." Only Jesus Christ can say, "Do not worry about tomorrow. God knows what you need." Only Jesus Christ can say, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly." Only Jesus Christ can assure you, "Fear not, fear not... for I have overcome the world." So a word to the "none's" and the just "spiritual"... sadly, none of these promises are you able to claim because you don't have Jesus Christ in your life.

You know, there's an old, Scottish prayer that goes like this: "From goulies and ghosties and long legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night... good Lord, deliver us!" One might also add, "From sorrow and gloom, visions of doom, from anything that causes us fear, good Lord, deliver us!"

Yes, deliver us, Lord, from things that make us fearful. Now I don't know why or how that prayer initially came about, but I think those words rather effectively put into perspective one of our greatest concerns. And that is fear. We all have fears of some kind, and fear is a powerful enemy. Fear debilitates. We have difficulty taking action, except maybe to run away. Fear distracts. When we're afraid, fear fills our minds and hearts, leaving little room for anything else. Fear distorts. When we are afraid, we see the world through a cracked and clouded lens. Yes, fear is an enemy. Let's get personal a moment... what do you fear right now? Because you see, today's scripture, the road to Emmaus, where those two people were feeling afraid - sad, hopeless, fearful for their future, is really a metaphor for some of the roads in our lives. It may be the road out of the doctor's office with the news you didn't want to hear. Or the road leading away from a relationship. Or the road to the end of life. It may be a road beset with worries about children or grandchildren or parents. Or a road filled with financial woes. It could any road leading to change and the disruption of life as you know it, and you fear for the future.

So, let's look closer at today's scripture and see what it can teach us modern day disciples. As early followers of Jesus, Cleopas and his friend had seen and heard everything that Jesus had done. They were believers. They supposedly had faith and trust. But when they saw Jesus hanging there on the cross, they believed him to be dead and gone and out of their lives. So here they are, confused, questioning, and afraid. Yes, we've all been on that same road to Emmaus in one way or another. And that road certainly feels long. And we find ourselves asking, where is God in all this? Where is he?

Well, let's continue with today's story. A stranger approaches and asks "What's going on?" Now this "stranger" is none other than Jesus himself, but they don't know it's him. The Bible tells us, "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him." But why would that be? Well, I think we see it in Cleopas' answer to Jesus' question. He expresses their distress in three simple words, "We had hoped." Can't you feel the desperation in their voices? We had hoped he would answer our prayers and deliver us. Now, despite all the things Jesus had taught them and said to them and promised them, here they are feeling hopeless and afraid. Sounds like us sometimes, doesn't it? Things don't go the way we want with our families, with our work, with our bodies, and it's easy to lose hope and become fearful. And when we begin to feel like this, one thing is certain - we sure don't recognize Jesus in our journey down the road of life. Like those followers, our "eyes are prevented from recognizing him" because our fears blind us to God's presence in our lives.

But the truth is, Jesus was there all along, offering them his presence and his strength. In fact, he even gave them a slight reprimand. "Oh, how foolish you are, how slow of heart you are. Haven't you heard the scripture, how I told you "to fear not"? How, if you trust me, I will bring you comfort and peace and hope to handle anything life sends your way." And the two listened, and they invited him in. And then, they recognized him. You see, it's only after the travelers open their hearts to Jesus that they see Jesus as the one who can help them overcome all the fear and suffering and darkness they were going through.

Now lest you think this is a message relevant only two thousand years ago, it's not. Last week I quoted author Anne Lamott from her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*. Well, in another one of her books, *Traveling Mercies*, she tells the story of her rescue from a life of fearfulness, a life filled with drunkenness and debauchery. You see, at one point, she was a N-O-N-E. But she remembers the day she was first made aware of the presence of Christ. She writes, "The experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling of someone following me. So I tried to stay one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door (that's where she lived) every time I entered or left." The next Sunday Lamott decided to go to church. She says, "I began to cry and left before the benediction and raced home and felt someone at my heels. I walked down the dock, past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I open the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and started to cry again. I took a long deep breath and said out loud, all right, you can come in. It was", she says, "my beautiful moment of conversion." She finally opened her heart to Jesus and claimed his promises of peace, love, strength, comfort that only he could offer. And she realized that Jesus was there all along, following her down the road.

In ending, there's one final thing I want to point out about the scripture, because it's really a "wow" thing and shouldn't be overlooked. After Jesus breaks the bread and his presence is fully revealed, something very significant happens. You see, in those days, people didn't travel at night. But these two disciples get up and rush back at once to Jerusalem to tell others of the great news. They go out into the dark no less! Unafraid, of things that go bump in the night! For the good Lord has delivered them, and they do indeed have nothing to fear. And neither do you! Amen.