

## **Easter 3 Year A, 2023 Gospel Luke 24:-13-35**

*God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Open our eyes to see you. Amen*

### **Despair and Hope**

This story of Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus is a classic, one of the all-time favorites for so many of us. The textbooks on scripture tell us that the road to Emmaus story is unique to Luke's gospel, which is full of stories that only Luke tells. But before I get started with my message today, I want to share a discovery I made while preparing the sermon. Finding things I never knew before always gets me energized, and maybe the scripture buffs among you will like this. If we go to the longer ending of Mark's gospel, chapter 16, vv. 12-13, we find this: After the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene at the grave on Easter morning, "he appears in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them." So, in Mark there are two people walking into the country who also encounter the resurrected Jesus—this sounds to me a lot like what Luke is describing on the road to Emmaus, don't you think? Now, did Luke, which was written about 30 years after Mark, use this brief comment in Mark as his source for today's story? Maybe so, in which case this walk is not unique to Luke. It gets a little more complicated though. Mark's gospel has two endings. The first ending—the shorter one—ends with the women who find the empty tomb fleeing in fear, and "they said nothing to anyone." There's nothing in it at all about a resurrection appearance! How can we have a gospel without the resurrected Jesus appearing to someone? Well, whoever wrote that original shorter version of Mark did! So, somebody came along later and added the longer ending which is where we see Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and to "the two" walking in the country. It may be that whoever added this longer ending to Mark did it decades later, and had Luke's gospel as his source. We don't know for sure. It's another mystery of our scriptures. Enough for the study of scripture.

Each year at Easter we face the same question: what is the meaning of this Easter experience, the death and resurrection of the Christ Jesus, for each of us in our own lives today? Perhaps we can put ourselves in the position of those two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Their lives have changed for the worse, from their perspective have been turned upside down. They are distraught. They have lost the hope they once had that this Christ Jesus, who they thought was the Messiah, would usher in a new way of life for them and for their world, a way of justice and peace and love. “We had hoped!,” they say in their despair. Now we too are discussing these things as we walk along, trying to discern the meaning of what happened in the gospel story and in our own experience. Our question is this: Is there any persuasive reason to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead or that God is actually present in the turbulence and the disappointments of our own lives? This road to Emmaus is a metaphor for the place you go when your world has collapsed, when the tossing and turning of an anxiety-filled sleepless night has left you exhausted and fragile, your dreams shattered, and your hope gone. Frederick Buechner, pastor and author and one of my favorites, in his book The Magnificent Defeat puts it like this:

“Emmaus is the place we go in order to escape, where we spend much of our lives, you and I—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say ‘Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’... Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget our despair that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. But there are some things that even in Emmaus we cannot escape. We can escape our troubles, at least for a while.

We can escape the disappointment of the job we did not get or the friend we hurt. We can even escape for a while the awful suspicion that life makes no sense and that this religion of Jesus is just a lot of wishful thinking. But the one thing we cannot escape is life itself..." Yes, life happens, the good and the bad. And how do we handle it?

So here we are on the road of that seven mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend are trying to make sense of what happened over that weekend in Jerusalem, the torture of Jesus, the cross, the death. Nothing turned out like they thought it would. What will we do now? Then they encounter a stranger walking toward them. They have no clue who he is. He asks them what they had been discussing and this stops them in their tracks. "What, are you the only person around who hasn't heard about Jesus, our great hope, the one who would restore peace and justice and..., that he was condemned to death and killed on a cross?" And then their memorable lament: "We had hoped Jesus would be the one to save us."

We know the rest of their story, about how after inviting Jesus to eat with them, after he breaks bread and gives it to them, that their eyes are opened. They recognize that this man is Jesus, and then he disappears. In looking back on the encounter they realize they should have known that the stranger was Jesus all along. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?," they say. But he is alive. Their hope is restored. They have moved from despair to hope. Jesus the Christ is still with them. He has met them on that road to Emmaus. They run back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

I think the Christ meets us too, on our own Emmaus roads. And I think that we like Cleopas and his friend usually don't see it or know it when it happens. God's presence is elusive, fleeting, out there on the edge of our awareness and perception. If we are honest we have to confess that it is never constant, steady, or predictable. Do you remember the nuns in "The Sound of Music" as they sing "*How can you catch a moonbeam in your hand, how do you*

*hold a wave upon the sand?"* I think God is kind of like that. That moment when the transcendent becomes imminent, when we sense and know God's presence, in those unitive experiences, those "thin places" where that veil becomes transparent, is always transient. We know God's presence in such moments, but then the mundane of the world closes in again. I think because of this we learn to recognize and then treasure those experiences in retrospect, in looking back on the encounter, just like Cleopas did. Yes, in the midst of our own walks to Emmaus, in those times when it is hard to hope, when as Buechner says "life happens," it helps to look back at other times when God was there and we just didn't see it—when we know in looking back that God was and has been there all along. How does Christ encounter you in your own life? Think about this. Is it in worship in church, in prayer while alone, in the love of family or friends, in the eyes of your child as he or she says "I love you", in silence while gazing at a star-filled sky, or listening to the wind move through trees? Is it God's Presence amidst the suffering and grief of a crisis, a diagnosis you had prayed you would not get, the loss of one you love? Where does Christ encounter you? I want to look for those encounters, to stay awake, alert to the possibility, no the certainty of that Presence, because it is always there, in all of us and in all of creation. And just as Jesus surprised Cleopas and his friend, coming so unexpectedly like he did as a stranger walking along the road, that Presence may come when we least expect it too, and at times when we are least able to see it.

Fred Rogers was an American television personality you'll remember from the children's series "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." He was known for his passion for filling the world with more love, kindness, and care. One of his most famous quotes was this: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" And later he added this: "To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by

realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.” A lot of people have used Mr. Rogers’ quote since then, in horrendous times like after the gun violence and mass murders of our children in their schools, trying to provide some kind of comfort and understanding for the children who witness the slaughter and survived, and for the loved ones of those who did not. The quote has continued to spread, recapturing our attention each time a national tragedy occurs. It has been used to help children and adults traumatized by mass killings in places like Oklahoma City, Columbine in Aurora CO, the Sandy Hook school in Newtown CT, the Boston marathon bombing, in Parkland FL, Uvalde, TX, Covenant school in Nashville, at a sweet 16 birthday party in Dadeville, AL, and elsewhere. The list goes on and on. These “helpers” are trying to make it easier for kids to talk through tough topics like death and violence, and the feelings that come with them. Mr. Rogers’ foundation keeps his commitment to youth education and counseling alive, and has made his mother’s words a significant part of its message. It’s clear each time her thoughts are passed along on Twitter and Facebook and elsewhere that it provides comfort to children and adults as well, and a reminder to ourselves that there is still much good amid all the bad, and to look for those people trying help the victims who survive these killings. Look for the helpers in all the events in your life, good and bad, because it is in them that you will find the Christ. Even in the midst of our despair, Christ is there, and our hope survives. This I think is the meaning of our Easter experience, of this post-Easter faith that we profess. We are Easter people, after all, and that means that Christ is alive, that we are never alone, that there is hope, and that love never dies.

