

WALKING TO EMMAUS ALONG WITH JESUS

The two men who were on their way to the town of Emmaus should have known it was Jesus walking beside them. After all, they were disciples of his. They had been around him plenty long enough to know what he looked like. They had heard the sound of his voice on numerous occasions. They had listened to him teach and preach to large crowds many times. Again and again they had witnessed him healing the sick and doing lots of other miraculous things. Yes, the two men should have recognized Jesus immediately, right off the bat, as soon as Jesus strode up to them. But for some reason, they didn't.

The NIV Bible—the Bible our church uses—says “. . . they were kept from recognizing him.” But I really like the way the New Life Bible puts it.

“Something kept their eyes from seeing who [Jesus] was.”

“Something shut down their awareness of Jesus' presence, prevented them from recognizing that Jesus was beside them, walking with them and talking to them.

Why were they so clueless? What had blinded them to the presence of the risen Lord, who was in their midst? Maybe it was the deep grief caused by Jesus' death. Their eyes were wet with tears, and it may have blurred their vision and made them unable to see Jesus walking right beside them. Maybe it was the searing pain that followed the brutal death of someone they cared deeply about. It would have been difficult for them to see clearly if they were totally focused on mending their broken hearts.

Maybe it was their disappointment, and even anger, that Jesus had failed them. After all, they had placed all their faith in Jesus and believed he was the Messiah, the One who would finally drive out the despised Roman occupiers and liberate Israel so that it could once again become a great nation under God. With that hope dashed, the two disciples may have felt resentment and closed their eyes to any other possible path to victory God might use, such as resurrection.

Or maybe it was simply life itself, with all their struggles and troubles that had accumulated over time and weighed them down more and more until at

last the camel's back had snapped. The light of joy and peace had been snuffed out, and now their lives were shrouded in an all-encompassing, blinding darkness.

Doesn't that happen to us, on occasion? Well, at least to some of us. The slings and arrows of life and human existence—the grief, pain, loss and challenges we all experience at one time or another—can become so onerous and taxing that it prevents us from recognizing the Lord in our midst. We become blind to Christ who is walking through the valley of the shadow of death with us.

I know several people who struggle with depression. Not all the time, but often enough that it becomes an impediment to living a full and happy life. Many people don't understand depression. They think it's only a temporary period of unhappiness or a bad mood the person is going through that he or she can snap themselves out of if they would just make the effort. But it's not like that at all.

Depression literally changes the way one looks at the world. In the midst of depression, the only thing that person can see is hopelessness and gloominess. Any glimmer of light, any possibility for joy, seems distant and elusive, and the Lord of Life, the resurrected Christ, seems a million miles away. I said seems a million miles away because that's not actually the case. In reality, Jesus is right there with them, talking to them, encouraging them, patiently and determinedly trying to open their hearts to him, but the illness of depression keeps their eyes from recognizing him.

In the very first sentence that begins the well-known book *The Road Less Traveled*, author Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote, "Life is hard." That's true, isn't it? Even without depression. We love life, we cherish life, we cling tenaciously to life, and it would take an awful lot to get us to give up our life; but even so, life is hard. It can be painful and burdensome and difficult. And that can completely blind us to presence of the resurrected Christ, the Christ of Easter, who is walking right beside us.

Writer and pastor Frederick Buechner was once preparing a sermon on Jesus' statement in John's Gospel, "I am the resurrection and the life." During the week he was writing that sermon, he and his wife were going to a dinner party. On their way to the party, they remembered that they needed to pick up some groceries, so they pulled into a grocery store parking lot, took their shopping list and tore it in half. Buechner headed down one aisle and his wife headed down the other.

No sooner had they gone their individual ways when Buechner remembered something they had left off their list . . . the *Cheerios*. He shouted

across the aisle to his wife, “Don’t forget the *Cheerios*.”

She shouted back, “And you don’t forget the chocolate syrup. But remember that you’re on a diet.” Buechner responded, “Well, you only live once.” At which point the woman at the cash register leaned over the breath mints and tabloid magazines and said, “Don’t you think once is enough?”

That’s what the cashier said out loud, but Buechner said he thought he really heard her say something else. He wrote, “I looked at the woman at the cash register, her hair soaked with perspiration, her face lined with weariness. I think what she was actually saying was, “I’m tired. I’m tired of my job. I’m tired of these people and their groceries. And I’m tired of myself. I’ll do my job until the end, but when the end comes I won’t complain.”

The cashier rang up the grocery items and said to Buechner, “Once is enough, thank you.”

Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection and the life.” And at Easter, God showed that it was true. What difference might Easter make to a person like that grocery store cashier? Or would she even be able to experience Easter? Would the burdens of her life prevent her, blind her from seeing the hope that Jesus’ resurrection offers? Would she be able to recognize the risen Christ walking beside her on the road to her Emmaus, wherever Emmaus was in her hard and challenging life?

A theologian and writer named Tom Long was once asked to be the preacher at a conference on the coast of South Carolina. When the conference was over and he was on a plane headed home he found himself seated next to a man in his 70s who had also been to the conference. They began talking, and after a while their conversation became more candid.

At one point the man shared with Long that he and his wife were the parents of several children, one of them a son in his 30s who was confined to a nursing home. He had been in an automobile accident several years before and his brain had been severely damaged. He was in a permanent comatose state.

The man startled Tom Long when he said, “We had stopped loving our son. We visited him every week because it was our duty as parents, but we had stopped loving him. Love is a reciprocal relationship, giving and receiving, but our son couldn’t receive and our son couldn’t give.

We unfalteringly went to see him, but there was no love in our hearts for him until one day, we went to visit our son and were surprised to find that he already had a visitor in his room. We didn’t know this person. He was a stranger. It turned out that he was the Lutheran minister from down the street who just routinely visited the residents in that nursing home. We waited outside in the hall and we witnessed this visitor engaged in a one way

conversation with our son, and I thought to myself, 'As if my son could appreciate a conversation.' Then he took out a Bible and read my son a psalm. He read it as though my son could appreciate a psalm being read to him. And then he prayed a prayer, as though my son could appreciate a prayer. Then it suddenly dawned on me and I thought to myself, this visitor, this minister, sees something that I didn't see. Of course he sees. He sees my son not only with clinical eyes, but with eyes of faith, and he treats my son as a child of God."

That man's experience was what might be called an Emmaus moment: a moment when the power of Easter and the resurrection unexpectedly broke through, and the risen Christ suddenly appeared right there in front of him, and his heart was opened see his son differently and love his son again. Like what happened to the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. These two followers of Jesus were trudging along a dusty road, walking seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and the risen Christ joined them on their journey.

At first Jesus was incognito; his resurrection glory was hidden behind the face of a stranger. But by the time they reached the end of their journey, they recognized their resurrected Lord in the simple act of the breaking of a loaf of bread, and they were moved from discouragement and despair to hope and renewed faith.

When the early Christians first read this Gospel story we read today, they would have understood that the road on which Cleopas and his companion were walking on wasn't just the road to Emmaus; for them it was a symbol of the Christian life and journey. And this story had a promise embedded in it: the promise that, if you want to experience the resurrection of Jesus; if you want to have an Emmaus moment in your life, where you live, then get up in the morning, put one foot in front of the other and head down the road, the road being the way of Jesus Christ. And Christ will meet you on that road. Maybe you won't recognize him at first, but Christ will meet you, and you will eventually see and recognize him.

So, where are our Emmaus moments? When might you and I experience one?

I can't tell you exactly. You see, Emmaus moments tend to into our everyday lives in God's time and on God's terms, in sudden, unexpected and surprising ways, when we least expect them. Emmaus moments are unforeseen gifts from God, usually random, transformative experiences of God's presence and power that help us recognize that in Jesus Christ, life has vanquished the grave, and love will ultimately overcome hate. And that changes everything, including the way we look at and see life in general and our lives in particular.

Emmaus moments enable us to see the world we live in, not as a place of

death, decay and defeat, but as a place that is awaiting and groaning in anticipation of God's final victory.

I want to end my message this morning with this interesting fact. The late theologian Marcus Borg wrote that today there are three different places in the Holy Land that claim to be the village of Emmaus. Three places! Furthermore, Borg stated that there's no record of any village called Emmaus in any ancient source except the New Testament. And the only place in the New Testament that mentions the village of Emmaus is Luke's Gospel account that we read this morning.

So, Emmaus couldn't have been much of a village. Perhaps a rinky-dink, unimpressive place of a few hundred people or so. And yet, in present day Israel there are three Emmasues. Take your pick as to which of them is the real one. Your guess is as good as mine!

This is probably the result of shrewd marketing by Israeli merchants in three backwater towns, each claiming to be Emmaus to draw tourists there. But I don't believe it really matters to us and to our faith if the true location of Emmaus is unknown and a total mystery. And Marcus Borg didn't think so, either. Because, he said, "Emmaus is nowhere; [but] Emmaus is everywhere."

Emmaus is anywhere we go where Christ reveals himself to us in that place. Emmaus is wherever on our life journey, while we're walking along the road at church or at home or at work or at a nursing home or at the family dinner table or any other place, where our eyes are opened, and we suddenly and unexpectedly recognize the risen Christ in our midst, and Easter comes to dwell in us.

My prayer for us today is that, as we travel down the road of life together and individually, we will always keep our eyes open and our hearts receptive so that we can recognize our Lord walking along with us as we journey to our own personal Emmasues. Amen.