

Carol M. Strickland
 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 First Sunday After Easter, April 11, 2021
 Text: Luke 24: 13-35

The Road to Emmaus

Introduction to Scripture

We pick up Luke's narrative in chapter 24. The setting is on a road just outside Jerusalem. The time is Easter afternoon. The characters are two of Jesus' followers. Listen for God's word: *Luke 24:13-35*.

Sermon

So, after the bewildering events of the last week, two of Jesus' disciples were headed back home. One was named Cleopas, the other is unnamed. Doubtless they were still in shock. Sudden death of a young person does that to you—it upends your world. And this wasn't a tragic accident but a travesty of justice. An innocent man, indeed, a great prophet, and healer, and teacher was dead. They were in shock. The week had begun jubilantly with Jesus riding into the capital with great fanfare but ended brutally with his execution on a Roman cross alongside common crooks. How could this be, they wondered. Further, confounding the matter was the discovery of his empty tomb by women who were among his company and its confirmation by Peter, his chief apostle.

In shock, Cleopas and the other disciple trudged homeward toward the village of Emmaus, numbly putting one dusty foot in front of the other. Soon a stranger going their way joined them. As they conversed about current events, the way you do with strangers, it became obvious that this fellow was clueless about what had taken place. So, they filled him in.

But then the stranger filled *them* in on how their scriptures had pointed to these very things: a Messiah who must know suffering before glory.

When they neared Emmaus, they persuaded the stranger to come and stay with them since it was getting late, and the sun was setting. He accepted their invitation. During supper when he took the loaf of bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes were opened. The stranger was none other than Jesus himself! And suddenly, he disappeared. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was opening the scriptures to us?" they said to each other. "And at the table, did we not suddenly recognize him?"

It's an odd story. Emmaus doesn't appear on any maps. Cleopas and his companion walk the better part of seven miles not knowing who Jesus is, though they were two of his disciples. And at the moment of their realization, he vanishes. The story shimmers with mystery, as do all the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels. The risen Jesus is that way, though: strange, surprising, coming and going unexpectedly, sometimes unrecognized, both embodied and ephemeral, and causing hearts to be strangely warmed, in John

Wesley's famous turn of phrase. We have entered a different realm here. We are in the territory of faith. Rational thought has its place, and we Presbyterians know it well. But the territory of faith in the risen Christ has a different geography. It's a land of experience, of emotion, of intuition, of gut. It's a land of insight, of conversion, of irrational knowing, of trust.

What I think Luke is getting at with this story is how we, who are around *after* 30 AD (or whenever Jesus died), encounter Jesus and truly become his disciples. Assuming that Luke wrote near the end of the first century, his audience wrestled with this as surely as we do. How do we not just know about Jesus, but know Jesus? How do we experience the risen Lord? How do we traverse the territory of faith, not just the country of intellectual understanding? It seems pretty clear to me that in this story Luke points to two primary ways. Enter any Christian church and you'll find them in the furniture—a pulpit and a table. We call them Word and Sacrament, Scripture and Eucharist, Bible and Communion. The stranger on the road to Emmaus beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted Holy Writ for Cleopas and his companion. And then the supper they shared became for them the Lord's Supper. So, when traveling in the land of faith, we need to pack a Bible and to share our meals.

We call the Bible the Word of God. When we say this phrase, Word of God (with a capital *W*) we are saying that we believe God reveals God's self to us in the words (little *w*) of the Bible, words which point to God's action in the history of Israel and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. That is, God communicates to us, the Risen Christ communicates to us, the Holy Spirit communicates to us through what we read in the Bible. There we read stories about the all-too-human people God chooses. We read passionate pleas by fired-up prophets. We read beautiful poetry and prayers by psalmists. We read startling parables and preaching by Jesus, and so on. In all kinds of genres, penned over many centuries, edited and handed on by a variety of people with sometimes differing views, all in conversation with each other, God speaks to us. It's good for us to use all the critical tools scholarship can provide when we read the Bible. But we must also read it with our imagination. We must read it with open hearts and expectation that God's going to say something to us. That's why we pray every Sunday a prayer for illumination. We are asking God to open our eyes to see and ears to hear in the ancient words written long ago a divine message addressed to us. Admittedly, sometimes the words of scripture just pass you by. But, heavens, when they pierce you like a swordⁱ, you know you've crossed over into the territory of faith.

That can happen when you are exhausted by grief and the 23rd psalm—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"—covers you like a warm blanket.

Or when you are at wit's end with a wayward child and you hear in your head, "Love is patient and kind," and you can go on another day.

Or when you listen to a sermon on John the Baptist and that wily prophet reaches out through the centuries, grabs you by the scruff of the neck, and moves you to repent of some sin that is weighing you down.

In these ways God speaks to you through the words of the Bible read and proclaimed and remembered. It can happen at church. It can happen at a Bible study. It can happen when

some scriptural snippet haunts you—maybe a Bible verse or a line of a hymn, nearly all of which are based on scripture.

During Lent I uncluttered my house as a spiritual discipline. I purged drawers and cleaned out closets. It was hard. I'm a saver, which is to say that I've accumulated too much stuff and hoarded things others could use. I was losing steam when my evening devotional book quoted Paul: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who ... emptied himself." Those words jumped off the page and struck me in a new way. They encouraged me to keep at the task of learning to let go, learning to empty myself like Christ. In those biblical words, God spoke to me.

While the Bible is the Word of God, I think God speaks to us through other words. Good books can convey God's truth, as well as holy writ. Pay special attention when there's a lump in your throat or a tear in your eye as you read. It's likely that God is showing you something. When Harry Potter's mother throws herself between him and the evil wizard Voldemort's deadly curse, this is a shining example of a "great myst'ry" as Hagrid calls it, the mystery of sacrificial love. When Mr. Beaver replies to Susan about the great Narnian lion Aslan, "Safe? ... Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good," we get a wonderful aha image of God. When the French bishop places his hands on Jean Valjean's shoulders—the man who has just stolen his silver but whom the bishop covers for in front of the police—and tells him he's bought his soul with the silver and ransomed him from fear and hatred, we glimpse the holy redemption that buys us back. So, while God speaks to us through words and images of the Bible that enlighten us, encourage us, woo us, convict us, startle us, and comfort us in visceral ways, God also speaks to us in literature and beyond that, in other arts—music, dance, theatre, film--and in creation itself.

On the road to Emmaus it was through a stranger who opened up the scriptures to the bereft disciples that the risen Christ spoke to them. And their hearts burned inside them. They had entered the territory of faith.

When the two disciples invited the stranger into their home to share a meal, they travelled deeper into that land. It was a simple meal, but more than a meal. While at table when the guest became host and took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to them the same way he had at the Last Supper, they saw him. They knew him. Christ was there in their midst.

Holy communion or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist or the Mass—it goes by many names—is our holy ritual that reenacts Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. In our Presbyterian tradition, it's evolved to a doll-sized cube of bread and jigger of juice. But the size of the Communion elements doesn't matter, just like the amount of water at baptism doesn't matter. I guess we Presbyterians are minimalists, or perhaps just thrifty. What matters is that God speaks through them. God speaks forgiveness. God speaks encouragement. God speaks love. Participating in Communion isn't an intellectual exercise. It's a mystical experience. That's why we welcome children to the Table. You don't have to understand it rationally to get it spiritually.

While we celebrate this sacrament in church—or during this pandemic—at home but still among the communion of saints--other meals can be sacramental, too. A kid crosses the lunchroom to sit with the loner. Christ is there. A grieving family sits down to the chicken casserole provided by ladies from church and shares stories about their beloved. Christ is there. Old friends meet over coffee and bagels and Christ is there, too. Wherever there is hospitality, Christ is there. And I think it's particularly true when hospitality is offered to people we don't know and people who are different. That's why the Bible repeatedly tells us to extend hospitality to strangers.ⁱⁱ

When my children were small, I worked part-time so I could stay home a lot. A single woman moved into the house at the end of our cul de sac. I trotted down with a jar of homemade bread and butter pickles to welcome her to the neighborhood. When she answered the door, I was greeted by a short, very curvaceous woman with an olive complexion and a main of wavy black hair. She oozed sensuality. Next door neighbors told me later that she skinny dipped nightly in her backyard hot tub. She warmly invited me in. The bare living room had but two armchairs on one end and two bookcases filled with books on the other. She served me a few crackers and a large glass, about whose contents I did not inquire. The longer I was there, the more exotic she became. Her name was Georgia. She was from Wisconsin. She had a Harvard MBA. She belonged to a Christian tradition I had never heard of, whose ancient roots trace back to the first century, the Armenian Apostolic Church. In other words, to this lanky, chaste, Southern, WASPY, mother, she was different. As we visited, though, we talked of novels we loved, and religion, and life. Two hours later when I staggered home, my heart was on fire.

I happened to look up, and someone from the city had come by while I was there and changed the street sign. It no longer said Earlston Drive. It said Emmaus Road.

It's odd. You just never know when that can happen.

Let us pray the prayer of St. Glenn: Startle us, O Lord, with the wild improbability of what we say we believe and with the beauty of this place and what our being here represents. Amen.

ⁱ Hebrews 4:12

ⁱⁱ Romans 12:13, I Peter 4:9, Hebrews 13:2. See also Titus 1:8, I Timothy 5:10