

The Road to Emmaus
Luke 24:13–35

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We're going to engage in a bit of time travel now. Even though we celebrated Easter Sunday two weeks ago, in this morning's scripture passage from the Gospel of Luke, it's still Easter. Of course, they wouldn't have called it *Easter*, but it was still the day of Jesus's resurrection from the dead.

That morning—Easter morning—Mary Magdalene and the other women had gone to Jesus's tomb and discovered that his body was gone. At first they were afraid that it had been stolen, but two angels appeared to them and told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. Absolutely thrilled, the women had hurried back to the eleven disciples (Judas no longer being with them) and told them the good news, but the disciples didn't believe the women. Why would they? After all, people don't rise from the dead every day—and there was no doubt that Jesus had died. Peter, at least, left the group and went to the tomb to check for himself. But when all he saw was a few empty grave clothes lying on the ground, he just walked away, puzzled and shaking his head.

This is where today's Scripture passage picks up the story. Luke tells us in verse 13, "That same day, two of them were walking to the village of Emmaus." Emmaus no longer exists today, and scholars disagree on exactly where it was or what it might have been known for, but it was about seven miles from Jerusalem—an easy afternoon walk.

In verse 13, when Luke says "two of them" were walking to Emmaus, he means that these two men had been among the group gathered with the eleven disciples earlier that day in Jerusalem. Earlier that day, Cleopas and his friend had heard the good news of Jesus's resurrection from Mary Magdalene along with the disciples, but they hadn't believed it either. So when Jesus met them on the road to Emmaus that afternoon and began walking along with them, they didn't recognize him as Jesus. Actually *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, says "they were not able to recognize who Jesus was."

In times of crisis and emotional upheaval, our senses—our eyes and ears—are often remarkably unreliable. Two people experiencing a traumatic event at the same time will often see, hear, and feel things differently. And how many times have we heard stories of people who have experienced traumatic events and cannot remember significant details? We can't remember

being in a car accident, or falling down the stairs, or even our grandmother's funeral. I don't know about you, but lately I'm having trouble remembering what day of the week it is. Our hearts and brains tend to protect us from the overload of trauma, crisis, and even significant disappointment.

When Jesus asked Cleopas and his friend what they had been talking about as they walked along the road to Emmaus, Cleopas was surprised that Jesus seemed unaware of the momentous events of the previous few days. He said, "Our high priests and leaders betrayed Jesus, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him."

Cleopas and his friend had clearly been followers of Jesus, for Cleopas describes Jesus as "a man of God, a prophet ... blessed by both God and all the people." The two men had probably spent the previous few days in Jerusalem. They might have even been present at Jesus's crucifixion.

We also know that Cleopas and his friend were deeply disappointed. Cleopas tells Jesus, "We had our hopes up that he was the One about to deliver Israel. And it's now the third day since it happened... Early this morning some of our women went to the tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said Jesus was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus."

Oh, the irony. Cleopas says to Jesus, whom *he* does not recognize, "*They* didn't see Jesus." Considering the traumatic events that had occurred in Jerusalem over the previous few days, and the huge disappointment that Jesus's crucifixion represented to those who hoped him to be the Messiah, it doesn't surprise me that Cleopas and his friend don't recognize Jesus. Their brains just wouldn't go there.

I love how Eugene Peterson translates verse 25, where Jesus calls Cleopas and his friend "thick headed and slow hearted." Jesus says to them, "Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?"

Let's be clear—Jesus isn't mad at Cleopas and his friend. He's just journeying with them, walking side by side, enjoying their company, sharing space. You see, he knows exactly why they can't "simply believe." He knows how traumatized, confused, and scared his followers are, in the wake of his crucifixion, and he knows why they're having trouble believing in his resurrection.

He know, because he knows *them* better than they know themselves. So what does he do? *The Message* tells us that "he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through

all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him.”

Even then, Cleopas and his friend didn't recognize Jesus. But when they sat down to supper together that evening, and Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it (Sound familiar?) and gave it to them, they finally got it. Verse 31 says, “At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him.”

Can you imagine what that must have felt like to them, to realize that they were having supper with Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead? I can't ... And then Jesus disappeared. Mission accomplished. Luke doesn't say that Jesus went away, just that he disappeared.

“They were not able to recognize who he was,” says *The Message*. The New Revised Standard Version says, “Their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” What keeps us from recognizing God today?

Cleopas and his friend are described twice in this passage of Scripture—first as “thick headed and slow hearted,” and later as “open-eyed and wide-eyed.” Speaking only for myself, I'm leaning much more heavily toward “thick headed and slow hearted” these days.

You and I, my friends, are on the road to Emmaus. We've not held a worship service in our church sanctuary since March 15, six weeks ago, when a state of emergency was declared for the State of Maine. Here in Maine, we've seen 990 confirmed cases of Covid 19, with 50 deaths. The United States is rapidly approaching one million confirmed cases, with 50,000 deaths. 26.5 million Americans have lost their jobs, and a recent Pew survey found that in the past six weeks, 43 percent of Americans—43 percent!—have either had their wages cut or lost their jobs.

We're tired, scared, frustrated, and confused—much like Cleopas, his friend, and *all* of Jesus's followers. We don't understand why this is happening to us, we miss our community and fellowship, and we don't know what's going to happen next. We're traumatized, whether or not we want to admit it, just as Cleopas and his friend were.

But you know what? God is right here with us on this journey, though we might not recognize him. God is the brave clerk who checks out our groceries at Hannaford, the dedicated Food Pantry volunteer handing out bags of groceries in our church parking lot, the wise pastor who makes sure we have a worship service on Sunday mornings, the cat who curls up in your lap and purrs while you watch TV, and the flowers just beginning to bloom in our gardens.

And if we'll pay attention—open up our hearts and minds and ears—we'll hear God's voice speaking to us. God has no reason to hide from us, just as Jesus didn't hide from Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. But God does walk beside us as a fellow traveler on our life's journey, and I

think sometimes his close proximity actually can make it hard for us to see and hear Him. We expect God to be much bigger and more dramatic than the friendly, comfortable presence walking down the road beside us.

We've all seen cartoons of stereotypical married couples, where one person—usually the wife—talks so much that the other person—usually the husband—stops listening. The wife's voice becomes background noise, and the husband's mind wanders. In one of my favorite cartoons, the wife says, "You never listen to me. You only hear what you want to hear." And her smiling husband replies, "Sure, honey, I'll have a beer."

God can be saying to me, in a calm and loving voice, "It's okay, Cindy. I've got this. You don't need to worry, just trust me. You've got everything you need." Meanwhile I'm frantically praying, "O God, please please please protect me. I'm so worried about this whole pandemic thing. I'm scared that I'm going to get sick, or run out of money, or never leave the house again, and I'm pretty sure that I'm slowly driving Laurel crazy ... And please, whatever you do, don't let me run out of toilet paper or coffee."

Cleopas and his friend took the time to listen to Jesus, even before they realized who he was. Let's all do the same, as we journey along this road to an unknown future, knowing that God's got this.

May God support us all the day long,
Till the shades lengthen and the evening comes,
And the busy world is hushed,
And the fever of life is over,
And our work is done.

Then in His mercy
May He give us a safe lodging,
And a holy rest
And peace at last.

—John Henry, Cardinal Newman (1801–90)