

Sermon | Easter 3
Luke 24:13-35
26 April 2020

The Emmaus Road

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's Sunday. The First Day of the Week. Three days since everything went down in Jerusalem. Jesus arrested and tried, crucified and buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Saturday had passed quietly without much news. And now it is Sunday. Three days after the fact—that horrible day.

It's getting toward evening, about four o'clock or so. And two of Jesus' former disciples are throwing in the towel. They are going home. Back to where they live. Emmaus: a little village about seven miles away from Jerusalem. Not too far. But then again, not so close either. A short drive, but a long walk.

They had been in Jerusalem that whole week before. Saw Jesus arrive last Sunday, eight days ago. Saw how he came from Bethany fresh from his greatest miracle: the raising of Lazarus. My, how that pushed public opinion over the edge. Many were believing in him now. And Jesus rode that popular wave into the city in a triumphal entry fit for a King. Passover pilgrims thronging the gates to get a look at him, to welcome him with palms, songs of praise. Everyone hoping, wondering, waiting to see if this is the one, the one sent to redeem Israel. The hopes and dreams of all the world on the shoulders of Jesus.

Cleopas was one of the two who saw all these things. The other disciple is nameless. Was it his wife? His son? Maybe an Apostle? We don't know. But Cleopas was there with his friend. There on Palm Sunday. Stayed with Jesus in Jerusalem waiting for Passover. When everyone was wondering, what would Jesus do? Was this the time? Time to gather the swords and form ranks? Storm the Antonia Fortress where the Governor was—that hideous pagan castle that loomed large over the magnificent House of God?

Cleopas was part of that wondering crowd. And he was there on Tuesday. Saw Jesus go into the Temple. Saw him cleanse the place with a whip in his hands just like Judas Maccabees years before—liberator of Israel—and then Jesus, openly debating with the Pharisees and Sadducees. They came, trying to trap Jesus, but left with their tails between their legs, trapped by him. What wisdom! And, what courage! Could anyone but the Messiah himself face down his enemies like this? With such boldness?

Whether Cleopas was personally present in the Upper Room on Thursday, at the very least he heard—heard about how Jesus washed the disciples' feet, how he broke bread of which he said, "This is my body," shared a Chalice of which he said, "This is my blood." Told them to do this often in remembrance of him. Gave them a new commandment: that they should love one another, as he had loved them.

That was about when everything went south. Out in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying. Out in the open, where his enemies could find him. And then the band of soldiers. And then Jesus, impossibly, telling his Apostles to sheathe their swords. What kind of Messiah fights like this? And then the trials, the beatings, the mockery, leading to the inevitable crucifixion. Cleopas and his friend saw it all. Even if they were watching from afar. And as they saw their Lord crucified, they saw their hope crucified.

All of their hopes, all of their dreams, all of their best wishes and the deepest desires of their hearts crushed and dashed to pieces, that no-Good, very Bad Friday. How unfortunate! We had staked our lives on Jesus of Nazareth. We had thought—really thought—that he was the one. Not only had we followed him this past week. But for the better part of three years. Gave up everything. Dropped our nets to follow him as two of his disciples, just as he commanded us to do. Drop your nets. Come follow me.

And the whole time we were with him, our hearts burned within us. For he was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. You should've heard him preach! He didn't preach like all the other Rabbis and teachers of the Law. He didn't talk as one who just knew the truth. He spoke as if he was Truth itself, embodied in a human being. And, people were hearing in Jesus a message they were getting nowhere else. He preached in such a way, that lost people came to believe that God was looking for them. He preached in such a way, that sinners came to believe that God was meaning to reconcile himself to them, and to all the world. And it was all happening right here in Jesus himself—the one in whom old things were being made new again. By him, the blind were seeing. Deaf hearing. Lame walking. Lepers cleansed. Even the dead, raised. We had thought, we had hoped he was the One.

But not anymore. Not now, that he's dead. Oh sure, some women of our company amazed us this morning. They were at the tomb early, in the deep darkness just before dawn. They had come back to the tomb to finish what they had started on Friday. What they had to hastily do because the sun was going down, and the next day was the Sabbath when no one can work. They had come back to the tomb to anoint his body with spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews. And they had come there anxious: who will roll away that big stone for us, from the entrance of the tomb? But arriving, they found the stone already rolled back, and some angels there, preaching him alive. And then some of the Apostles went and found it just as the women had said. But him they did not see.

They didn't see the body of Jesus. That was the critical thing. So no one thought anything of it. Grave robbers, perhaps? Certainly, the women weren't trying to fool us. Mary Magdalene certainly believed her own story, about talking to the gardener, only to realize she was talking with the risen Jesus himself. But you know how emotions can get the best of you? Make you see things that aren't there? Make you recall things that didn't happen, when you're tired or afraid, or grief-stricken, or panicked?

It's long road back to Emmaus. But then a stranger shows up. And a pretty ignorant stranger too. Like the only person in the office who doesn't know who won the Super Bowl the Monday after. Has your head been in the sand? Have you been locked in a closet? Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who hasn't heard, who doesn't know, the things that have gone down here in these past days? And he asks, innocently enough, playing the part—what things? And then, they proceed to tell Jesus about Jesus.

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" You say you believe in a Messiah. And true enough, the Scriptures that you know well, have learned since childhood in the synagogues, they do teach that such a Messiah will come. But you've done nothing but freight that word with your own wishes and dreams as to what the Messiah should be. You've got your own ideas of what redemption means. But you haven't really listened to Moses or any of the prophets. You've lived your

life in the shadow of this Temple. Watched the priests slice into the sacrifices. You've seen the blood, the atonement price for sin. Your whole life has been saturated in the stuff of religion.

But you don't know what any of it means. You are just as ignorant of the meaning of Holy Scripture as you are ignorant of who it is that is speaking to you now. Don't you know that the Bible will remain a closed book until you see that it is about the Christ who suffers and dies, and who rises again for the salvation of the world? So let's look again. Let's go back to those familiar stories and texts that you've been acquainted with since Sunday school, some of which you know by heart, and yet, still have no idea what they really mean. Let's take a fresh look at the Passover Lamb, and the Ram sacrificed in place of Isaac, of David defeating Goliath, and Jonah in the belly of the Whale. Let's go to Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. And even Leviticus, with the sacrifices and temple and priesthood. Moses in his office as prophet and priest. And let's see how it all preaches, not a military Messiah, but a bleeding Messiah, yea, a dying Messiah, dying in your place, dying for your sin, and then rising again that you might rise in him.

You've been looking to God for a political Savior. But oh my, how you underestimate God! For he would give you so much more than this. He would give you an eternal Savior, a Savior from sin and death. So here, let's start from Genesis and go all the way through to see how God has done it. We've got seven miles to walk after all. Let's see how Friday was no terrible accident. But fulfillment of all prophecy.

And at this, the hard heart of unbelief started to melt, the flame of faith rekindled, and that holy joy returned, joy they once knew in the presence of Jesus—it was all coming back to them now. But before they know it, they're already home. Time flies, like settling into a good book, or a good movie, only to have it end way too soon. He looked as if he were going on. But they begged him: Stay with us, for it is evening, and the day is far spent. A prayer for the stranger's continued presence with them.

And he graciously obliges. Enters the house where they live. Sits down at table for supper. But then the guest strangely becomes the host. Takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it to them. Echoes of the Upper Room the week before, the Passover table, the breaking of the bread. This is my body. And in that moment, their eyes were opened. And they knew him. And he vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, were not our hearts burning within us, as he preached to us on the road, as he opened to us the Scriptures? So they run back to Jerusalem to tell the others, how the Lord truly is risen, how he was with them on the road, and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

There are two aspects of this Emmaus road story that, if we are listening carefully, should strike us as quite odd. The first question is this: why did Jesus hide his identity from the two disciples? Why didn't he just come out and say who he was? Why did he wait to reveal himself to them until that moment of the breaking of the bread? And then why does he, in that moment, immediately vanish from their sight?

Well, Jesus did want them to recognize him. He did want to open their eyes to the reality that he was really there with them, even bodily present for them. But he wanted to wean them off of his visible presence. He wanted them to recognize him in the Word and in the breaking of the bread.

Because this Emmaus story is not just about those two disciples. It is about the Church. It is about you and me. It is about how Christ will be with us, in the in-between time, the time in between his Ascension

into heaven and his second coming in glory. And it shows us how we are like the Emmaus disciples. Because like them, we don't see Jesus visibly. We won't be able to reach out and touch his body, like St. Thomas was given to do, or Mary Magdalene. But that doesn't mean Christ has abandoned us.

He's with us. Just with us in a new way. With us in the same way he was with those Emmaus disciples. Wherever the Scriptures are opened up, and Christ is preached—his death and resurrection for the salvation of the world, and as the fulfillment of all the prophetic utterances of the Old Testament; and in the breaking of the bread. With us, in what we as Lutherans call, the Means of Grace, the Word and Sacrament. And we see Jesus in these places by faith, not by sight. Even more we receive him in these places, for the forgiveness of sins, for the rekindling of faith, and for the renewal of our hope, as we wait for the day when faith will give way to sight, when what is hidden will be revealed and we will see him with our own eyes. Until that Day, the prayer of the Emmaus disciples is our prayer:

Abide with us Lord, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. Abide with us and with your whole Church. Abide with us at the end of the day, at the end of our life, at the end of the world. Abide with us with your grace and goodness, your holy Word and Sacrament, with your strength and blessing. Abide with us when the night of affliction and temptation comes upon us, the night of fear and despair, the night when death draws near. Abide with us and with all the faithful, now and forever. Amen.

VOTUM.