

OUR JOURNEY TO EMMAUS

LUKE 24:13-35

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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All of us have been on a journey at some time in our life---whether just going to Rochester, or to Florida, or to Europe. And we know that when we go on a journey, we take some things with us---clothes, a toothbrush, perhaps a map or a guidebook---things we will need on our journey.

In the passage we read from Luke, Cleopas and an unnamed person, who may have been his wife, were going on a journey. They were going from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They took several things with them on their journey. First of all, they took each other as a companion. They did not go on their journey alone. They walked and talked together, sharing their feelings and thoughts.

Second, they took with them their information of what had happened two days earlier on that day we call Good Friday. They also took with them the reports of the empty tomb which the women had discovered early that very morning. Their information, however, was limited, and they did not understand what had happened. They were confused, bewildered, and disillusioned by the events of the past three days. They had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel, but now those hopes were utterly destroyed by his death.

Moreover, they did not know what to make of the reports of the empty tomb and the strange vision the women had seen of angels who said that Jesus was alive. So the two travelers talked about these puzzling events as they walked along on their journey to Emmaus.

But they also took something else with them---an unknown companion who became their interpreter and guide to understanding these events. This guide began with Moses and all the prophets and explained to them the things concerning the Messiah. Their unknown companion, of course, was the risen Jesus, but they did not recognize him.

We, too, are on a journey to Emmaus. Each one of us is on a spiritual pilgrimage that began at the cross in Jerusalem. Like Cleopas and his companion, we also are taking several things with us on our journey. First, we are taking each other as companions. We are not going alone, but rather with the whole community of faith. We receive support, guidance, and encouragement from those who have gone before us on this journey and those who are with us now.

Second, we are taking with us on our journey our information about what happened on Good Friday and Easter. That information, of course, is contained in the Bible, which is our guidebook for us to use on our journey.

And yet, even though our guidebook is the “unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God’s word to us,” (the *Presbyterian Book of Order*, W-4.4003b) still we are confused, bewildered, and disillusioned as we go along on our journey. We don’t understand the things that happen in our world. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why are some human beings so cruel and inhuman to others? Why does God allow innocent people to be killed?

We don’t know the answers to these questions, and sometimes we have difficulty using our guidebook, the Bible, to guide us in our search for answers. Now the Bible contains the information we need for our spiritual journey, so the problem is not with the guidebook itself, but rather with our difficulty in understanding and interpreting it.

On their journey to Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion had the risen Christ as their guide to interpret to them the scriptures concerning himself. On our journey to Emmaus, the risen Christ is also with us as our unseen guide and interpreter.

According to Reformed theology, this is the correct way to interpret the Bible---to use Christ as our interpreter. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, said that we should interpret Biblical passages by looking at them through the glasses of Christ, the eyes of Christ, the mind of Christ. Not all Scripture passages carry the same weight; and some passages in the Bible, when seen through the eyes of Christ, clearly do not fit with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

For example, there are places in the Old Testament where the Biblical writers claimed that God had commanded the Israelites to slaughter whole villages of innocent women and children. But that picture of God as one who would encourage killing simply does not fit with the revelation of God that we have through the life and ministry of Jesus. So in interpreting those passages from the Old Testament, the Presbyterian principle is that if it does not fit with the God who is revealed through Jesus Christ, then it is not God’s word, but rather human words and desires attributed to God by the writers of those passages.

Presbyterians as a denomination do not interpret the Bible literally or believe that every word in the Bible is the word of God. According to our Presbyterian Confession of 1967, the Bible “is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God’s work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of human beings, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current” (9.29, Inclusive Language Text). Presbyterians take the Bible seriously, but not literally.

So Christ is our interpreter to help us understand the Bible. The Holy Spirit also guides us as we read the Bible and leads us in our search for answers.

When Cleopas and his companion arrived in Emmaus, they invited their guide in to share the evening meal with them and to spend the night. They still did not recognize Jesus. Jesus accepted their invitation, and they went inside.

At this point a very strange thing happened. Jesus, who was the invited guest, assumed the role of the host, and the host became the guest. Imagine how strange it would be if you had invited someone for dinner, and when your guest arrived, he or she suddenly took over all the duties and functions of the host or hostess, inviting you to the table, saying the grace, and serving the food. This is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the host to eat. And then suddenly, the eyes of Cleopas and his companion were opened, and they recognized Jesus. Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The same thing happens when we come to church, which is our Emmaus, to celebrate the Lord's Supper. We invite Jesus, our unseen companion on our journey, to come and dine with us. But it turns out that we are the guests for this meal, and Jesus is the host. Jesus invites us to come to the table. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to us. And suddenly our eyes are opened and we recognize Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Jesus is known to us in the breaking of the bread.

But for us, as for Cleopas and his companion, the Emmaus experience of breaking bread with Jesus is not the end of the story. When Cleopas and his companion recognized Jesus as their risen Lord, they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. We can imagine that in their excitement to share the good news, they practically ran the entire seven miles back to Jerusalem. There they told the disciples that they had walked with the risen Jesus and had recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

For us, too, our journey does not end in the Emmaus experience of the Lord's Supper. Like Cleopas and his companion, we are called to rise from the table and return to Jerusalem, to the world, to share with others the good news of the risen Christ.