

“SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART:  
I – THE DISCIPLES ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS”

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May 4, 2014

Luke 24:13-35

“You can’t see the forest for the trees.” You know that old saying? “You can’t see the forest for the trees.” Sometimes you’re looking straight at something, and you don’t even see it.

Such was the case one day in Basil, Switzerland. The renowned theologian Karl Barth lived and taught in that city, and one day he was riding in a streetcar, when at a stop, another man boarded and happened to take the seat right next to him. The two men started chatting with each other. Barth asked if he was new to the city, and the man replied that he was just visiting. “Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?” Barth asked. “Oh yes,” the man replied, “I’d love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?” Barth replied, “Well, as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning.” The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel and told his wife, “You’re not going to believe this – I met Karl Barth’s barber today!”

Sometimes, you can’t see the forest for the trees. That man, that day, didn’t realize he was in the presence of greatness, nor did those two people walking on the road to Emmaus on the day that we read about in today’s Gospel lesson.

They were in a bad way. Their world had been rocked by the death of Jesus, and they were absolutely despondent. It’s all they could think about – Jesus had been horribly killed on a cross, all their hopes and dreams were shattered, now they had heard the strange reports from the women about the tomb being empty – it was all too much. So here they were, walking together away from Jerusalem, hearts heavy, grieving so much loss.

And a man came along and joined them, and they didn’t know who He was.

One preacher put it so well when she said, “On the road to Emmaus they were merely going through the motions, traveling through the day to get to the next one. Their hearts and minds were stuck in a memory loop of grief and pain – so much so that they couldn’t see the risen Lord walking right beside them.” (On-line, “Rearview Mirror Evangelism,” Sharron R. Blezard, 4/30/14)

If you've ever lost someone you love, or lost something profound in your life, you know how that could have happened – you know how your loss so consumes you sometimes, that you don't see things right in front of your face. You know what it's like to walk "the Emmaus road."

Barbara Brown Taylor says the Emmaus road "is the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate defeated, your loved one has died – the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Blessed Brokenness," *Gospel Medicine*, p.20-21)

And Frederick Buechner goes even further to say that the Emmaus road is where we go to try to forget. He says, "Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that humanity has, have always in the end been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go (he concludes), where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life." (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 85)

To walk the Emmaus road is to be in a lonely place, struggling to deal with sadness and heartache, struggling to make sense of life, struggling to find hope in hopeless situations. That's where those two were that day.

And that's what they talked about with this stranger who joined them on the road. When he asked what they were talking about, the first thing the scripture says is that "stood still, looking sad." It almost took too much energy to tell their story.

But they did. They began to tell him about the awful events of the last few days. They told Him about the One that they thought would save the world, and how he had been cruelly killed. They told Him about the reports of the women, that He was alive, but they didn't sound convinced.

Then He started to talk, and He shared stories with them – stories of Moses and the prophets – and still, nothing – they still didn't recognize him. They still dwelt in darkness and sadness.

I wonder if they wondered to themselves if the darkness would ever go away. When you're going through those Emmaus road times, those times when you're traveling through "the valley of the shadow of death," you do wonder sometimes if the darkness will ever go away – if things will ever get better. You wonder if you'll ever have hope again.

I read a very moving story by the writer Anne Lamott in a sermon this week about a sort-of Emmaus road experience one woman had. This woman was a friend of Lamott's who one summer, took her two year old son and travelled to Lake Tahoe for a vacation. She rented a condominium by the lake for their stay. Since Tahoe is filled with gambling establishments and bright lights everywhere, the condo, like all rental places there apparently, was equipped with curtains and shades that blocked out all the light. Thus it was, that one afternoon, this woman put her two year old in his playpen in one of the bedrooms to take a nap, turned out the light, which made it pitch black, and then she left to go back into the living room.

A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room, and she got up, knowing that he had managed to climb out of his playpen. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she discovered, to her horror, that he'd locked it from the inside. He had somehow managed to push in the little button on the doorknob.

He was calling out to her, "Mommy, Mommy." And she was saying to him, "Jiggle the doorknob, honey, jiggle the doorknob."

Well, it soon became clear that he wasn't getting it, and she started to panic. And he started to cry, gently at first, but then, full-blown sobbing! She ran around, desperately looking for anything that might help her open the door. She tried using the front door key – no luck! She called the rental agency – the answering machine was on, so she left a frantic message and slammed the phone down. She called the condo manager's office – another answering machine – another frantic message. Every few minutes, she ran back to the door to try to calm her terrified little boy.

Finally, she did the only thing she could think of – she laid down on the floor in front of the door and slid her fingers under the door, where there was a one inch space. She kept telling him over and over to find her fingers. Finally, somehow, he did – and his little fingers grabbed hers, and they stayed there like that for a long while. He stopped sobbing, and after a little while, she quietly said to him again, "jiggle the doorknob, honey" and finally, after a half hour, he did and the door opened, and they were in each other's arms – and all was well.

And the one who told this story said, "I wonder if this is not something like the experience of Cleopas and his fellow traveler on Easter evening. How there seemed to be such an insurmountable barrier between them and the One in whom they had hoped so much. Like a door closed to them, until they realized that there were fingers in the gap reaching out for them, present to them more than they had thought possible." (Jon Walton, "Dinner in Emmaus," 5/8/11)

They realized that - when that night, as they sat at table with this stranger from the road, and watched as He broke the bread and blessed it, that it wasn't a

stranger at all – but Jesus, their Lord – alive! He had not left them – He was there – alive! And He had met them on the Emmaus road, when they needed Him the very most.

As one person put it, “They might have given up on Him, but He never gave up on them.” (Ibid.)

Perhaps that’s what we need to learn most from this story this morning. That the Lord never gives up on us, never leaves us alone. When times are good, He’s there. When times are tough, He’s there. When we fail to see Him though He’s right in front of us, He’s there. He walks with us through all of life, He’s always there.

My friends, no matter where you are on the road today, my prayer is that when we break the bread and drink the fruit of the vine this day, you will see Him, you will know that He is right here, right now, always with you.

And then, having seen that, you will, like the disciples did that day, rise and go forth renewed and refreshed into this new day. May it be so. Amen.