

“A Journey of Grief”
Luke 24:13-35
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This has to be one of the most intriguing stories in scripture! We meet a man named Cleopas and his unnamed companion, the resurrected Jesus is present but in an unrecognized, mysterious fashion. When the travelers’ do suddenly recognize Jesus, he immediately vanishes from sight. These travelers, having experienced the events of Jesus’ last days, leave Jerusalem making their way to Emmaus. It is significant they are walking away from Jerusalem because Jerusalem is the center of the Christian mission. In Jerusalem, the apostles hold positions of authority in the Christian fellowship. From Jerusalem, preachers scatter to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth to spread the good news of the gospel returning to Jerusalem to give their progress reports. Their leaving Jerusalem can be interpreted as leaving hope behind, traveling the way of despair as they journey back to “business as usual.”

The travelers sound so ordinary. They sound like us. We who gathered two Sundays ago declaring, “Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed!” may find the “way of despair” also accurately describes our “business as usual” journey. Especially is a world in which “business as usual” means family members lose their jobs or their health, friends experience divorce or face the death of a loved one. What was it Cleopas said? “We had **hoped** that he was going to be the one to redeem Israel . . . to redeem us.” We had such high hopes! How far do we get from Easter before we stop on the road and stare at one another and look so very sad?

What makes the story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. I can understand Jesus appearing to the remaining 11 disciples and to the faithful women who followed him. But Cleopas and his companion are nobodies who have no idea what God might be doing. They could be any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road, the road each of us is on every day. This is what sets this story apart from other accounts of Jesus’ Easter appearances.

So how do we walk the road to Emmaus? There is no doubt the story directs us to the church, where we may encounter Jesus in the word and the sacraments. But not to “the church” that’s equated

with the institution and Sunday worship. We are directed instead to the church that meets a very ordinary world right in the midst of their confusion, pain and loss.

We never hear of Cleopas again after this passage and we never learn the name of his companion. They are not important people. They are “ordinary” people who have had the marvelous experience of following Jesus and his disciples. But that experience is now over and they are returning home. With Jesus’ death they have lost their faith and their hope. They are not looking for him; in fact, they don’t even recognize him when he joins them. Yet he chooses this place of loss to meet them. When he asks about their sorrow, they are so absorbed in grief they cannot believe this person doesn’t know about their experience. They tell Jesus the story of his own ministry and death, along with the skeptical news of his resurrection. For them the story is over. Their hopes have proven empty, and they are defeated. But then Jesus tells the story back to them, this time through the lens of their own faith tradition and scriptures. “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe. . .” The story is not about them and their disappointment, he says. It is a story about life, the world and everything in it.

If this story is, as Jesus says, about life then it has a lot to teach us about God and about ourselves in relationship to God. Jesus, the very revelation of God, seeks out these two ordinary travelers. He meets them where they are, journeying with them in their grief and hopelessness. Are we surprised? Should we expect any less from the One named Emmanuel meaning “God-with-us?” As Jesus journeys with them and later as he breaks bread with them his presence “burns within their hearts – and gives them hope.” Jesus’ actions reveal a God that will be with us in our confusion, pain, and loss of hope. His actions remind us of the power of the word and the sacraments to connect us with the presence of God. Jesus’ actions demonstrate how God finds us, particularly when our spirits are weighed down by sorrow and hope seems a distant, elusive promise. Most importantly, the **story of Emmaus invites us to expect God to find us.**

One of the temptations of being Christian is to think or act “**as if**” finding God is all up to us, that it is **up to us** to seek God’s will, seek God’s presence in prayer, clamor after the Holy Spirit to have more control in our lives. Wait a minute! Our relationship to God is a two way street! We may seek after God but God is always seeking

us. Remember who made the first move? “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Square one has always been God initiating relationship with us, followed by our response. It is not solely up to us to find God. So what does this story teach us about life? **The Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us.**

The travelers suddenly recognized Jesus when he blessed the bread, gave thanks and gave it to them. They found him during table fellowship reminiscent of sharing the Lord’s Supper together. During the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as we share communion together at Christ’s table may be a time we experience being found by God. It is a time to remember Jesus’ loving sacrifice for us. It is also a time to remember “who we are and whose we are”—beloved children of God, recipients of Christ’s forgiveness and love. In such holy moments, we experience being found by God. **The Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us.**

God sometimes finds us through scripture as God’s promises resonate within us.

As many of you know, my brother died the end of March and I have been on my own Emmaus journey ever since. The fact that my brother died alone really bothered me. While thinking about the last moments of his life one night, it occurred to me that he **was not completely alone** because God was with him. In my mind, I pictured the Risen Christ offering my brother the same invitation as death drew near, that Christ offers throughout our lives, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

As loving Parent, God finds us and gives us what we need. “As a mother comforts her child so I will comfort you, says the Lord.” (Isa. 66:13) “Peace I give you, my peace I give to you, I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” It is as the psalmist wrote, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death you are with me?” God’s promise to be with us in the valley of the shadow of death is as true for the person experiencing death as for persons experiencing the death of a loved one. At times, scripture resonates within us and we feel connected to God. In such moments, God finds us through scripture.

The Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us!

Another way I have been found by God on this journey of grief is through the many expressions of your love. Your cards, calls, and conversations remind me I am being lifted up in prayer and that I do not walk this journey alone. Hugs, flowers from the Wednesday evening Bible Study group, meals and a basket of pampering products from the ladies in Circle 1 have been tangible reminders of your love. Your prayers have resulted in my being comforted and receiving “strength beyond my own” when the weariness of grief loomed large. Your love continues to sustain me through a difficult time and means so very much! Thank you, thank you! Through your caring gestures, I have experienced the care of God. Sometimes, God finds us in the midst of Christian community—what an absolute blessing. **The Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us!**

The Emmaus story demonstrates through Jesus’ actions the actions of the God whom he came to reveal.

--A loving God that initiates relationship with us,

--a God that continually seeks us out to deepen our relationship,

--a God that finds us through God’s Holy Word and through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,

--a God that finds us through the loving actions and prayers of Christian community.

How have you experienced being “found” by God? How have you been “found” by the Risen Christ when you least expected it, at times not even aware in the moment he was there? Do you yearn to be “found” by God this day? **The Emmaus story invites us to expect God to find us!**

It will be so for you and for me. Amen.