

Third Sunday of Easter – ‘Emmaus Sunday’

April 26, 2020

Introduction

The Emmaus story is my favorite Easter story. At my Mom and Dad’s home, we had a copy of Swiss artist Robert Zund’s 1877 painting ‘*The Road to Emmaus.*’ It’s a picture of three people walking along a forest road. They are obviously talking together with the man in the middle gesturing as if making a point. The picture, while not reflecting the actual scenery that Cleopas and his friend saw as they walked, has always spoken to me in a powerful way.

As the story unfolds on Easter afternoon, we discover the third person is none other than the I think that it describes believers like you and me some two thousand years after Easter. Like the Emmaus travelers, we seem to be near the edge of the action; not the center, but at the edge. We weren’t at the tomb on Easter morning . . . We haven’t seen Jesus in person, either before or after his resurrection . . . And we’ve only heard the story from others. I suspect that, if we’re truly honest with ourselves, we are just as surprised and confused as Cleopas and his friend.

I take comfort in our Lord’s self-revelation and his patience as he ‘*opens the Scripture to them*’ as they walk. Were not our hearts ‘*strangely warmed*’ as we encounter Jesus where we least expect to meet him? Although our ‘Emmaus walk’ is limited because of social distancing and the corona virus, Jesus comes to us in Word. Enjoy the journey!

Gospel: Luke 24.13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the

women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

“Hiding in the Open”

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, today we journey to Emmaus and beyond. We talk along the way because we do not understand. We argue, half hoping that we are wrong. Like so many others, we have heard stories of your resurrection; there are some among us who even say they have experienced your presence. Let this all be true Lord, and let it be true also for us. With your Spirit, kindle in our hearts the fire of faith that knows you in the hearing of the Word and the breaking of the bread. We ask this in your life-giving name. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon – I joined the United States Army after graduating from the University of Minnesota. Since my background was engineering, I was assigned to Corps of Engineers and sent to officers’ school at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia. Our primary mission was to build roads, construct bridges, lay minefields, and work with explosives for demolition . . . *All helpful skills for a parish pastor.* My battalion’s motto was: ***“If you can’t bridge it, blow it.”***

Besides this very specialized training, they also trained us as infantry officers. Oftentimes, engineer units are used in direct support of infantry operations. Besides weapons’ training and a lengthy study of tactics, we spent a good deal of time learning about camouflage. We learned how to hide our tents, mark our vehicles, and to paint our faces with camouflage gray and green. During our final war games against the Blue Army, I was

ordered to camouflage my men and lead a night reconnaissance patrol to find a place to build a float bridge across the river -- Something engineering officers normally do.

When I reported back to my company commander in the morning, he looked at my recommendation and said, *'Nice job, Lt. Olson. That's where we'll build it. But how did you get past that Blue Army battalion? They were all over the place!'* I should have just accepted the compliment and walked away. But in my naiveté I looked at him as said, *'Battalion sir? What battalion?'* ***I had missed them completely . . . And fortunately, they had missed us also.*** I was so focused on security and charting our route in the darkness that I had missed what I should have been looking for. My counterpart in the Blue Army and I were young and inexperienced officers who were so caught up in their operations that we both missed what was really happening to our units. I was more lucky than good . . . He was good, but unlucky. ***My point is this: good camouflage is essential: It works and it allows you to protect yourself by 'hiding in the open.'***

Luck was with me at Ft. Belvoir. Sometimes it can save your life; but at other times, it can be costly because you miss the obvious. The disciples in today's Gospel are perfect examples. They missed completely the significance what had happened on Easter morning. You might say that Jesus was *'hiding in the open'* because everything that happened was laid out in the Law and the writings of the prophets which was part of their *'spiritual DNA.'* But the travelers were so focused on their own problems, that they almost missed Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

When I think about it, I know what happened to them. ***Everything*** they knew . . . ***Everything*** they believed pointed to one fact that every human being knew to be true: ***Dead is dead and no one ever leaves the cemetery unless they're only visiting the grave of someone who has died.*** The words of Jesus pointing to his death and resurrection . . . the Law . . . the writings of the prophets . . . and the testimony of the women at the tomb were camouflaged by their grief. As far as they were concerned, the story of Jesus ended on the cross.

St. Luke tells us that it was a simple trip to Emmaus . . . Some 7 miles from Jerusalem. The travelers were truly anonymous disciples. Nothing is known about Cleopas . . . His companion is unnamed. They were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus after the Passover. Their journey was not a pleasant one. A translation of the Greek suggests that they argued as they walked. Then, an unknown stranger joined on the road. They did not know that it was the newly Resurrected Jesus. When he asked what they were talking about, Cleopas mocked him, ***'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there these last days?'***

When the stranger pressed for an explanation, Cleopas described in detail the story of their erstwhile Messiah . . . *How they thought he was the one to redeem Israel and bring the*

Kingdom of God into being . . . How Jesus had healed the sick, fed the multitudes, and gave hope to people who had none. But now, it was over. Jesus turned out to be nothing more than a dreamer who built castles in the sand. Jesus was dead; and with him, his visions. Those who had followed him had fled for their lives and hid from the authorities.

But then, the tone Cleopas' voice must have changed. There were rumors . . . Stories, he said, that were certain to make the chief priest and elders even more vindictive. '**... Some women in our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive.**' But Cleopas was a practical man. It was over. Why stay in Jerusalem and share the fate of Jesus? There was only one decision that made any sense: 'Hide in the open' . . . Join the crowds going home after Passover.

I can identify with Cleopas and his friend. He made a good decision. After all, we also live in a dangerous world. Sometimes it's a good idea to 'hide in the open' . . . To blend into the scenery until things blow over. If we do so, perhaps trouble will pass us by. But unfortunately, you and I both know that this isn't the way the real world works. The so-called 'common denominators' of life always seek us out. Death, sickness, pain, worry, loneliness, insecurity, and despair . . . They see right through the camouflage we wear. Hide where we might, they always seem to find us. The only danger is that we are so intent in hiding ourselves that we miss the very things that might save us.

There is another dimension to the story that strikes me: Cleopas and his friend may well have been 'hiding in the open' as they fled Jerusalem, **but so was Jesus**. When he approached Cleopas and his friend, they did not recognize him. Jesus would not allow them to remain alone, despairing of the future. He would not accept their self-imposed exile from the world. **Hiding or not, Jesus sought them out.** That's what the resurrection was all about . . . **Jesus died so that 'all might have life and have it abundantly.'** The hidden Jesus said to them, '**WAS IT NOT NECESSARY THAT THE CHRIST SHOULD SUFFER THESE THINGS AND ENTER INTO HIS GLORY?**' **And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them, in all the scriptures, the things concerning himself.** And not knowing why, their hearts were strangely warmed.

When the travelers arrived in Emmaus, the stranger appeared to be going farther. The Risen Christ does not force himself upon others. Cleopas and his friend invited him to stay with them that evening. At the evening meal, a miracle occurred: **the Guest became the host and a Messianic banquet took place in that small room.** When Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes were opened. They knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread. The Lord Jesus was 'hiding in the open' in the Scripture and in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal.

Martin Luther frequently talked about *Deus Absconditus* which means ‘*the hidden God.*’ *I like that . . .* We encounter the ‘*hidden God*’ in the most unusual of places . . . a manger in Bethlehem . . . a Jewish carpenter turned Messiah . . . a Roman cross outside of Jerusalem . . . a God hidden in human suffering. Jesus was ‘*hiding in the open*’ and that’s what makes Emmaus road story so important. Neither disciples past, nor disciples present can escape ‘*the hidden God*’ who will stop at nothing to redeem them from their sins. Today, as we continue our Emmaus journey, the persistent stranger overtakes us again and again. And each time he tries to engage us in conversation, hoping that we might recognize him for whom he really is. He attempts to penetrate a pessimism that comes from having been disappointed so many times before.

Like I said, Jesus is persistent, he has traveled with us since the day of our baptisms, seeking to make himself known as the one sure thing in this world where everything else disappoints. ‘Hiding in the open?’ Not anymore. Today, we have seen the Lord!
Amen