

I have attended gatherings where I was ready to leave, but wondered if it was appropriate to do so. Perhaps you have been at party, a company function, or even a gathering around a funeral, and you were ready to leave, but you were not quite sure if it was right to do so; the cake had not yet been cut, or the honoree had not yet received the framed commendation, or the grieving friend is holding tightly to your arm. You are ready to leave, but weighing if it is the right time to say goodbye.

As I read today’s lesson of the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24, I wondered if a similar quandary had faced the two disciples walking together. They are not two of the twelve Jesus called, but among the larger group of followers who gathered in Jerusalem to grieve Jesus’ death over the days following. Now it has been three days. Time beckons. The sun is setting and they have a two hour walk home. Whether it was because they had to work the next day, or the grandparents needed relief from caring for the grandchildren, or simply because they felt grieved out, I imagine the two sensed it was time to leave, but wondered if it was okay to do so.

Let’s begin to hear the story of the two disciples walking with on the Emmaus road. We will read the account in parts. It is still Easter– all of Luke 24, takes place on resurrection day. Luke 24:13-35:

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>Then 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?’***

<sup>19</sup>~~He asked them,~~ *‘What things?’*

***We replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>But 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.***

We had hoped, but it has now been three days. Luke describes the two as being sad, or in some translations, their faces were downcast. They are discussing all the things that had taken place in the days prior; yet, their discussion is not passive – the word has more a sense of debating, even arguing. When Jesus asks what they have been discussing (as if he doesn’t know!), one scholar suggests as a literal translation, “what words have you been pitching back and forth?” Things are still unsettled, unanswered for them, but they have left the grieving room in Jerusalem. They are on the road to Emmaus.

In his book, “The Magnificent Defeat”, Frederick Buechner imagines times when we sense the need to leave, and head to Emmaus. He writes: “Emmaus is where we go when life gets to be too much for us; ... the place we go in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole [darn] thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’”

“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 people have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends.” [Buechner, Frederick, *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), p. 85-86]

We had hoped, but it has now been three days, Cleopas and the other disciple tell Jesus. This is a pair in despair.

This walk to Emmaus occurs just after the Easter morning discovery. Luke has reported three named, and an unnumbered group of unnamed women, have visited Jesus’ tomb and found it empty. Two angels reminded the women how Jesus said he would be crucified but then rise again on the third day. The women remembered, but when they reported this, Luke writes, “*the words seemed to [the men] an idle tale and they did not believe [the women.]*” (24:11)

The two disciples share a version of this with Jesus, as we continue our reading:

***<sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,<sup>23</sup> and 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. <sup>24</sup>Some 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.***

*Then Jesus said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*28 As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>But they urged him strongly, saying,*

***‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’***

*So Jesus went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup>When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>They 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?’***

*<sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’*

***<sup>35</sup>Then we told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to us in the breaking of the bread.***

Dramatic irony is front and center on the road to Emmaus. Those who know, don't. The one deemed clueless, does. Those who know assume everyone should know what they really do not know.

Jesus asks, "What are you pitching back and forth? About what are you bantering?"

"What everyone else is talking about – are you clueless about the things that have been happening?"

"What things?"

The two disciples tell Jesus what they know about events, and in so doing, reveal what they do not understand. Jesus, accused of being clueless, then opens the Scriptures to the two disciples. Luke does not record as much as Jesus said, but the question he is answering is this: *Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*

The two disciples are without hope, though they do know that for which they had hoped: *...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*

Jill Duffield of the Presbyterian Outlook writes, "The two on the road say, 'But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.' When, in fact, through Jesus Christ, God has redeemed the world. Perhaps that is a word for our day, too. Our dashed hopes pale in comparison to God's promised plans." [Duffield, Jill, Looking into the Lectionary, April 30, "Presbyterian Outlook" weekly email.]

The Emmaus road is the place of journey, then and now, for those who are trying to piece together the reality of death and the hope of resurrection; the loss of a loved one, and the reality of the eternal presence; and the promise that through death God can bring life. The Emmaus road is the place we walk and wrestle with our uncertainties, even as we hope our hope will be restored.

I have to admit that in my study of this text, I ran across a surprising suggestion in regards to the unnamed disciple who joins Cleopas in answering Jesus along the road.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a riddle, one form of which is the following: A boy and a doctor went fishing. The boy was the doctor's son; but the doctor was not the boy's father. How can this be?

Now in this enlightened congregation this is probably not a riddle. You might have already whispered to your neighbor the doctor was the boy's mother; yet, when I first heard this riddle many decades ago, those who were baffled failed to imagine the doctor could be a woman, much less one who would fish.

So it has been for me as I have viewed the two walking with Jesus along the road to Emmaus. I simply assumed the unnamed disciple was a man, but in her biblical commentary on Luke, Sharon Rindge suggests Cleopas' walking companion might be Mrs. Cleopas! She notes Luke not only has women disciples, but often does not name women Jesus heals or encounters. Now, it can never be proven the second disciple was a woman, nor need it be. Yet, the suggestion itself came as a surprise to me, and it intrigued me as I reread the story with this possibility in mind. [Rindge, Sharon, Luke, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 287]

I wondered if the disputing as the two walked, could be a result of the woman having been among those who went to the Easter morning tomb and reported back, and Cleopas being among those who considered their report idle talk? And when they reached their destination, might it indeed have been the couple's home in Emmaus? All I know was that the possibility had me looking at this story a bit differently, and though it took time, I was glad to find an iconic image of a man and woman with Jesus, on the road and at the table, for the bulletin cover.

For me, the transforming moment of this story has always been at the table in a house in Emmaus when the two disciples' *eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus*. Then, in spite of Jesus' immediately vanishing at that point, the breaking of bread spurs the disciples to recall what they felt, but failed to recognize, when they walked with one they called a stranger, '*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*' At this point, the imagery spills over itself – eyes opened, hearts burning, recognition one they had known.

As we move into the house, and hear the words Jesus uses at the table when the meal was served, I often think we should have Communion when this story is read. Jesus' words are used when we celebrate the sacrament: *When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*

Jesus spoke these words when he had his last Passover meal with his disciples. He also used them when he fed the 5,000. He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. So, perhaps we should not isolate the words to the Communion table, but ponder them with all meals shared. Yet, the familiar words also have a twist.

Here is Jesus, in the couple's house, having food set before him. It is the couple's food. The eye opening drama begins with Jesus taking the food from his hosts – he took bread the couple has either bought or baked. He then blesses and breaks it, and then gives their bread back to them.

Jesus became the host in this couple's home. As Mark Douglas writes, this is "a revelatory event in which we discover that we have become guests at the very table we had thought that we set." [Feasting on the Gospel, Luke, Vol. 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p. 350.]

I usually have thought of Jesus as the guest at the table, and even an intruder into the conversation along the road to Emmaus. It alters my understanding to think of being moved to being a guest at my own table. Yet, when we move from host to guest, when we recognize one who knows when we thought we knew it all, we are not only surprised, but our eyes are ready to be opened and we can be transformed.

The story of Emmaus, on the road and in the house, invites us in, to join the journey. Having an unnamed disciple can help us think it could be me walking, sitting, talking, debating. [Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 354]

And if it could be me on the journey, I need to remember it could also be you on the journey. And if we are surprised by Jesus, and surprised by Mrs. Cleopas, we might also be surprised by who might be traveling with us on our Emmaus road, or seated at that table. The you may be someone to whom I might say, "You voted for who? You believe what about gay marriage? You believe what about climate change? You don't like praise music?"

The surprise of this story is not only Jesus the guest is now the host, nor that Jesus was recognized in the breaking of bread. I think the other surprise is who we may discover to be our companion along the road, sharing in the faith walk, the grief, the debate. It might just be our eyes first need to remain closed because of our preconceptions, and then in the breaking of bread, Christ opens them to reveal not only himself, but that we are fellow guests at his table with someone we might never imagine was traveling the same road as us.