

The Circle of Faith

by

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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?” ¹⁹He 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.

Of the seven post-resurrection accounts recorded in the gospels this story appeals to us, I believe, because the movement in it reminds us of our own journeys of faith. As with these two disciples, I know that my own life of faith moves in and out of seasons of perplexity, of grief and sadness, of doubt and certainty, punctuated by moments of curious incredulity. These two disciples take a long walk, seven miles long, processing their confusion following the death of their dear friend Jesus and their dashed hopes that had seemed to die with him. There is a pause in their journey around the dinner table and a brief, fleeting moment of recognition. Then, in terms of the space it takes up in the text, their excited return to Jerusalem reads like a sprint. They run back to meet their friends and tell them that Jesus is indeed alive for they had seen him.

Taken together, the long walk, the moment of recognition in the middle, and the rapid revisiting of where they had been create a profound movement of faith. At the moment of recognition, the circling back to where they had come from is a most significant aspect of this story, and when you think about that, you realize the text is almost always misnamed. "The Road to Emmaus," we call it, or "The Emmaus Road." The New Revised Standard Version puts in italics over it, "The Walk to Emmaus." These titles imply that the story moves in one direction, from Jerusalem to Emmaus and it stops there. But that is not how it ends at all! It should be called the "Slow Walk to Emmaus and the Run Back to Jerusalem." "That same hour," Luke says, "they got up and returned to Jerusalem," and we can just imagine them breathless as they came upon the eleven to tell them how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

These disciples, once over-burdened with a heavy load of sadness and confusion, have circled back to the place where they had begun in deep grief, and now with new joy in their step. With only a fleeting moment of revelation to go on, they are filled with faith and a story to share. The old place of broken dreams is now vibrating with joy that everything has changed because Jesus is alive, just as he promised.

New Testament Scholar Fred Craddock has noted: “There are three times in which we know an event: in rehearsal, at the time of the event, and in remembrance. In rehearsal,” he wrote, “understanding is hindered by an inability to believe that the event will really occur or that it will be so important. At the time of the event, understanding is hindered by the clutter and confusion of so much so fast. But in remembrance, the non-seriousness of rehearsal and the busyness of the event give way to recognition, realization, and understanding. It is remembrance, Craddock concludes, that is the “time of understanding, (whether it be) an important trip, a wedding, a gathering of friends or a conversation with a stranger turned Christ at table.”¹ These disciples remembered when they recognized the Risen Lord and circled back to the place where their journey began.

Two years ago, on the Saturday before Easter, Larry and I took a day trip up to Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. Earlier that week there had been an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about a church there. There was a dispute raging between the town and the Episcopal Church of St. Mark and St. John. The town was in need of a new building for county offices and a parking garage and the construction plan required drilling into the stone mountain side adjacent to the church. The congregation was worried that the project carried a high risk of damaging the foundation of the church. In the basement of the church, you can see that one wall is literally the stone side of Flagstaff Mountain, and there was good reason to suspect the drilling into the mountain would rattle the church, and possibly damage its stained glass windows.

The windows are not just any old small town church stained glass, and we decided we really wanted to see them. The church has sixty Tiffany windows, given by the family of Asa Packer, who made his fortune in the railroad industry and founded Lehigh University.² We went to the church website and saw that it hosts occasional tours, but

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary, p. 287.

² Jason Nark, “Could a Parking Garage Ruin an Iconic Church on a Pennsylvania Mountain?”, April 9, 2019, inquirer.com.

that Spring two years ago I had conflicts with all of the dates, so I just called the church to see if there were a time we could visit on our own. “The women will be here on Saturday decorating for Easter,” the person who answered the phone said, “I’m sure they wouldn’t mind your visiting then.” Two days later, in a spirit of spontaneity, we drove to Jim Thorpe. I will admit, it was something like walking into a Garrison Keillor story. There is no parking on the narrow road in front of the church, so Larry let me out and went to park the car. I opened the church’s creaking front door, and I heard a voice from the second floor call down, “Are you the couple from Philly come to see our windows?” We were, and were glad we did. This most priceless of all the windows is this one:



The Supper at Emmaus which was installed by Louis Comfort Tiffany himself in 1895.

One of the Tiffany windows inside St. Mark & John Episcopal Church in Jim Thorpe, Pa. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer for the Inquirer.

The colors are stunningly beautiful, and frankly, I am not sure I had ever seen this beloved story depicted in stained glass, much less by Tiffany himself. The window even contains precious stones embedded in places like the lamps on either side of the Risen Lord.

But let me tell you what surprised me. This window is not adorning a wall behind the communion table, where I first thought it should be, an eternal visual reminder of the words we so often use in our Communion liturgy, “and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” Rather, it is in a side transept, in close proximity to a door. The luminous glass depicts that fleeting moment when those disciples recognize Jesus. They have slipped off their seats and have fallen to their knees in worship and adoration. And then, we remember what happens next. Jesus vanishes from their sight, and they get up and head out the door running back to Jerusalem to share the good news of resurrection.

That window at St. Mark and St. John is not over the Communion Table. It’s near a door! They remembered and then they circled back to the place where life can be brutally violent and confusing, filled with grief and sadness, but also where from time to time – we catch a vision of the Risen Lord and are given the energy and the faith to live in those risky places as he taught us.

One biblical scholar notes that the good news of resurrection makes no difference until it comes into our everyday lives writing: “...Easter is no genuine celebration unless it touches the private wounds and the tragedies near at hand. Easter is not truly good news until it gets down to the local issues. When all is said and done, this is a story about how the truth of Easter belongs not only on the front page of the newspaper but also on the back page, nestled among the items of neighborhood news. This is a story of how the cosmic truth of Christ's resurrection comes home as a local issue.”³

³ Tom Long, Whispering the Lyrics, "Getting Down to the Local Issues," p. 97.

And so my friends, we celebrate the story of resurrection with glorious worship and great hymns accompanied by brass and choir and organ, and then we go back to the places from which we came. To the local disputes between a town's need for parking and a church's foundation; to cities in an uproar about innocent people being shot to death; to local politics about human welfare, the distribution of vaccines, the issues of education and poverty and crumbling infrastructure – you name it. That's where the Risen Christ sends us back, into the places of wounds and confusion to address them with courage because we have seen the Risen Lord. We see how the weary world is changed. How it is charged with new life and hope just where we are.

Writes Anna Carter Florence: “When you are crawling your way through the pit of despair, Jesus may show up as a friend, who gets down on her hands and knees and quietly crawls with you. When you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus may show up as a man at the bank, who takes your hand and leads you through the awful red tape of wills, insurance claims, and safety deposit boxes. When you are new in town, dreading that first day of middle school, Jesus may show up as the boy whose locker is next to yours, who says, ‘Hey, want to eat lunch together today?’”⁴

According to Luke, Easter faith is a heading out and a circling back to the dreaded places which have been transformed into something new by the living presence of God. Faith itself circles back to all the old familiar places – with the promise Christ is alive – and therefore our lives are forever being renewed.

AMEN.

⁴ Ann Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, April-May, 2008, p. 8.

