

Easter's Stranger

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?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The beauty of this familiar story is that it resonates with our multi-faceted experiences of faith in a living God who sometimes takes us by surprise. The Emmaus Road encounter of these two disciples with the Risen Christ aptly describes a spiritual experience in general, and Easter faith in particular. With their heads bowed under the burden of their sadness, they have left the crucifixion and Jerusalem behind and headed for home. Their grief over losing Jesus has been further confused by the women’s talk of an empty tomb, a vision of angels and rumors of resurrection. When you think about it, their first Easter experience was not unlike our present reality: with its headcount of who has died and confusion about what tomorrow may bring.

The Editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, my friend, Jill Duffield has observed how the conversation of these two followers of Jesus must have been so much like the conversations we are currently having. We sort through the trauma and the confusion of the impact of COVID-19, and we talk about these heretofore unthinkable happenings and how life as we knew it has been upended. Like those companions trudging home to Emmaus, we too are ruminating over the circumstances in which we unwillingly find ourselves; we too engage in circular, repetitive conversations asking questions with no answers.¹

How long will the pall of death linger? How did such a tragedy take us by surprise? When will this terrible threat end? When will life ever become normal again? Into their situation, not unlike our own, a Stranger came along, joined their walk to Emmaus, and interpreted their old, familiar scriptures with new light until their hearts filled with hope again. This Holy Stranger reminded them to put the tragedy of crucifixion into a scriptural context – into the story of God among the people of God, the larger story they once knew so well, but may have forgotten in their current crisis. Then after those seven miles of rehearsing the scriptures, they

¹ Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, online lectionary resource, 4/20/20.

recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. And then Luke almost teases our imaginations by saying: As soon as they recognize him, he is gone, vanished from their sight.

Faith is like that – isn't it? There are timeless assurances, of course, but much of our experience with God comes in quick glimpses, in momentary insights, through memories of a story we forget we knew by heart. This resurrection appearance on the Emmaus Road intersects with ours because all the elements of calling faith to the fore are here: grief, despair, confusion, hope, a fleeting moment of recognition, belief recovered, renewed energy to share good news with others.

Someone has said that Easter “occurs when we find in Jesus, not a dead friend, but a living Stranger”.² And I would add – in this season of pandemic – something we may have forgotten in our sad isolation from one another. Christ, the Living Stranger, often shows up first in our homes; God is uniquely revealed to us where we spend the better part of our days, and is made known to us in activities as ordinary as sitting down for a meal and breaking bread.

Think about where you first started having an experience of God? My guess is for most of us it was at home – through blessings over a table laden with food, during stories and prayers before bed, among the people we first knew who loved us beyond measure. During these difficult days, the good news of resurrection helps us discover in Jesus – not a dead friend, but a living stranger whose presence is made known to us initially through life at home.

I know we all miss being together for worship and the sense of community we share among church friends, but there is much to be learned about what it means to be Easter people in this Eastertide of isolation. We do not need to be together in the sanctuary to be the church. The Risen Christ shows up where we are. The Risen Christ is made known to us in the daily rhythms of life at home, and our challenge is to discern how to be the church, how to be faithful apart from one another, by living and sharing the gospel in both word and deed.

Seminary Professor Jana Childers says that a crisis calls forth creativity from us in ways that other things do not. She writes, “God has a way of using change to open us to complexities we might not otherwise have seen, to tenderness we might not otherwise have known and to a future we might otherwise have

² Quoted in a sermon by Edwin Searcy, “The Mysterious Stranger,” University Hill Congregation, 4/18/99.

feared. Yes, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. But Jesus is not static. He is on the move. And he is leading us into the new creation.”³

These two friends of ours on the Emmaus Road remind us that after the resurrection, Jesus did not head straight to the Temple where people were gathered for worship. He went home with a couple of followers and revealed himself to them there. That means he is in our homes in moments as ordinary as passing the bread. Christ comes to us like that, I believe, in ways that are far more modest than we might imagine. In the routine activities that occupy us, through the faces of people who lives intersect with ours, in grief that is shared with one another, in moments of kindness and compassion and hospitality, in the questions we ask. Wherever bread is broken with thanksgiving to God suddenly Christ himself shows up. We don't always know it while it's happening, but afterward we can look back and recognize that Easter's beloved Stranger, the Risen Christ, was there.

Did you know that Biblical scholars, and perhaps more importantly, Biblical archeologists do not know where to locate Emmaus? We are told that it was seven miles from Jerusalem, but if you head out seven miles from the city you end up in one of four different towns. The one which was identified by Medieval Crusaders as Emmaus we now know has no evidence that it even existed in the first century. The other three sites present no proof positive they are Emmaus either. Maybe, just maybe, we cannot locate Emmaus on a map because Emmaus is not so much a destination of one's feet, as it is a destination of the heart. It is that place to which we journey when we are trying to sort out complicated things, and our hearts burn with longing for God; the place where difficult words of scripture suddenly shine with new radiance, the place where we eat in good company, and in the midst of giving thanks for a common meal, we discover that God is at the table with us, and has been with us all along .

I am not surprised that no one knows where Emmaus really is, because Emmaus is wherever our lives weave in and out of the presence of Christ, and we discover in him not a dead friend at all, but a living Stranger, a sometimes fleeting, but always dependable companion.

AMEN.

³ Jana Childers, “A Kaleidoscope of Change Stories,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 2/3/2020, p. 46.