

ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS
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Text: Luke 24:13-49

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Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 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?" 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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 he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But 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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

HERE'S SOME BIBLE TRIVIA for you. I did a little research one time on Emmaus, the village where these two disciples are going, and I found out that nobody knows for sure where it was. Apparently in first century Palestine there were lots of villages called Emmaus, and nobody knows for sure which one is the one from the story.¹

It's as if Luke chose the most generic-sounding place he could think of as the setting for a story about meeting the risen Christ. And I don't know if he did that on purpose or not, but it's interesting to think of Emmaus as more of an idea than a location because then we can talk about it as place we've all been on the road to at one point or another.

So what's the idea of Emmaus about? What does this place represent? That's the question, and the answer is right here in the conversation the disciples are having at the beginning of the story.

It's Sunday afternoon, going on evening, and two disciples—Cleopas and one who isn't named—are walking along the road to Emmaus, talking about “all these things that had happened,” meaning all the things that happened to Jesus over the past week or so, from the moment he arrived in Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, to the moment he was arrested and brought before Pilate, to the moment he died and his body was placed in a tomb, to the moment they started hearing rumors about the tomb being found empty that morning.

The disciples are pouring over these events, trying to make sense of them, trying to figure out what went wrong. They'd pinned all their hopes on Jesus. He was the one who was going to restore Israel. He was the one who was going to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. He was the one generations had longed for, the answer to countless prayers. And for a brief window of time it seemed like all those hopes were about to be realized. It seemed like they were on the doorstep of a new day.

But then reality came crashing in. Jesus was put to death, his followers were scattered, his movement was squashed, and just like that, the dream was ripped away, and now the disciples are leaving town and going to this village a few miles away called Emmaus. We don't know why. Luke never says. But

whatever their business may be, we get the feeling that they're not walking toward something. They're walking away from something. They're walking away from their disappointment and despair. They're walking away from the crushing realization that things will never change, and this is all there is.

That's what Emmaus represents. It's the place we go to lick our wounds when the world has knocked us down and defeated us. It's the place we go to hang our heads when everything we believed in is gone. It's the hole we crawl into when the darkness overwhelms the light. The novelist Frederick Buechner put it best. He wrote:

“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 men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends.”²

EMMAUS COMES IN ALL shapes and sizes, then. For some, Emmaus is having a glass of wine (or maybe two or three) after a long day at the office. For others, Emmaus is sitting on the couch binging an entire season of whatever the latest show on Netflix is. I had a friend in Kentucky whose Emmaus was hopping on his tractor and mowing four acres of lawn every week.

For me, Emmaus was the cab of a Peterbilt, and what I was walking away from was ministry. I was burned out and disillusioned. I didn't ever want to set foot in a church again. So I turned in my resignation and hit the road just like Cleopas and his anonymous traveling companion.

Along the way, I had companions, too. They were my instructors and fellow students at the driving school I went to in Iowa, and my trainer after I got my CDL. But we didn't talk about Jesus much. We talked about how to back up trailers and fold tarps and secure loads.

But there was this one guy named David. He was a fellow student, and he ended up being my roommate in the second week, after both our original

¹ James F. Strange, “Emmaus,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 497-498.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 85-86.

roommates got cut from the program. In what still seems like one heck of a coincidence—or maybe no coincidence at all—David turned out to be a Catholic priest who was also on the road to Emmaus. Like me, he was walking away from ministry. Like me, he was burned out and disillusioned. So he'd gotten approval from his archbishop to take an extended leave of absence in order to discern whether he still wanted to be a priest, and he figured he'd have plenty of time to do that sitting behind the wheel of a truck for eleven hours a day.

Every morning, we had to get up early to catch the shuttle from the hotel to the training facility, and every morning David would get up extra early to do his daily devotions. He'd sit up in bed reading a little prayer book. After a few days of that, I started getting up extra early, too. I'd go down to the hotel lobby, get a cup of coffee, and then find a quiet place to sit and read the Bible, not as a pastor trying to figure out what to preach on Sunday but as someone just like Cleopas and company—someone who was lost and looking for something to hold on to.

And just like their hearts were burning inside them when a stranger came along and started opening up the scriptures, my heart was strangely and inexplicably warmed, as well. I didn't know where that feeling was coming from or what to make of it. I didn't recognize the source any more than the disciples recognized Jesus. I just knew I didn't feel alone and afraid anymore.

In the story, when the disciples get to their destination, they invite Jesus to stay and have supper, even though they still don't know who he is. It's only when they sit down and break bread together that their eyes are finally opened, and their lives are transformed. Within the hour they're on the road again, heading back to Jerusalem to tell anyone and everyone what happened to them.

When I got to my destination, I knew pretty quickly it wasn't where I wanted to be after all. The solitude I was seeking felt more and more like isolation. So I quit without any kind of back-up plan, which was a little scary. But that feeling I had back in Iowa of not being alone was still with me, and I knew it would be okay. Sure enough, within a week or two I heard about an opening at Valley, and before I knew it I was on the road again, heading back to ministry to tell anyone and everyone what had happened to me: I'd met the risen Christ, and he'd brought me back to life.

SOONER OR LATER WE all end up on the road to Emmaus. Sooner or later we all get knocked down and defeated. Sooner or later we all have our dreams ripped away. It's called being human, and unfortunately there's no getting around it. But those moments of despair, when we're walking away from something, licking our wounds—those are moments of possibility. Those moments when our hearts are broken, and we're vulnerable—those are moments when we're more open, and God is able to come into our lives with hope and healing.

But we have to be paying attention. We have to be looking out for God, and we have to be looking within ourselves. We have to search for God in scripture, in prayer, in community, in worship, in service. And when we sense that God is near, when we feel our hearts burning, we have to invite God in.

I still keep in touch with David. I texted him just before Easter. He's still on the road, but he's been talking to his archbishop about becoming a chaplain in the Navy, and he's already started the application process. It sounds like he's on the road back to ministry, and I told him how happy I was to hear that. He asked me to keep him in my prayers, and I said it would be my pleasure. Amen.