

“On the Road” 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35
Rev. Michele Ward Third Sunday of Easter April 26, 2020
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Dramatic Gospel Reading

Luke 24:13-35

Rev. Michele Ward, Shirley Parry, Bonnie & Elden Schneider

Michele: The Gospel reading comes from the book of Luke. Listen now for the Word of God.

Michele: 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,

Shirley: "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

Michele: They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him,

Elden: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Michele: He asked them,

Shirley: "What things?"

Michele: They replied,

Elden: "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.

Bonnie: 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."

Michele: Then he said to them,

Shirley: "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?"

Michele: 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,

Schneiders: "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

Michele: 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,

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Schneiders: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Michele: That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying,

Schneiders: "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

Michele: Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Michele: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

All: Thanks be to God.

One of my favorite pastimes is walking. Growing up in northern California, I liked to walk around our four acres and wander through our neighbor's almond orchard when the trees were blooming. At night when the stars came out, I would walk down the hill from our house to the barn, listening to horses eating their dinner. In college, I walked in the 40 acres of Ponderosa pines behind campus. Someone had placed an old lamppost in the woods that looked like the one from the Chronicles of Narnia, which was a favorite spot of mine to stop and think. Some of the most powerful conversations I have had with friends have been while walking. So when I moved to Baltimore in the summer of 2018, I needed to find new places to walk. I discovered the Greenmount Cemetery a few blocks from our house, and it has become a quick favorite of mine. I love to walk there because it has some of the oldest trees in the neighborhood, a resident fox, and beautiful sculptures. And I love the paradoxes of the cemetery, too-- how it is a place we only go when we have to be there, and yet is full of unexpected growth. A place full of death, can also be a place full of life. I see life all the time at Greenmount Cemetery. As I watch the birds prepare their nests, the fox comes out to play, the trees bloom and grow their leaves... as I weave my way through the tombstones and buildings ... I see new life all around me. I just needed to slow down long enough to look.

As we enter this text more deeply, I want you to hold in your mind a time when you went on a walk and slowed down enough to notice the world around you. I want you to hold in your mind a time when you had a conversation with someone that changed your life. Hold on to those feelings as we engage this passage together--it might help you imagine what the disciples were feeling and experiencing that day so long ago.

The disciples needed to slow down long enough to look, too. These disciples are part of the larger group that followed Jesus. They left Jerusalem downcast and overwhelmed with their grief. Disillusioned, grieving, and afraid, they leave the other members of their community. The Eleven Disciples are still in Jerusalem as these two head out.

Jesus meets the disciples on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus three days after his crucifixion. They do not recognize him, and are blown away he asks them about what happened in Jerusalem that is causing them so

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much anguish. They tell their story of sorrow to Jesus, explaining to him what has happened. They have come from Jerusalem where the women “have astounded them” with the good news of the empty tomb. Some of them went to see it for themselves, but didn’t see Jesus. And rather than stay in Jerusalem after this, they had out of town, actively grieving and uncertain of the future.

The death of Christ was not simply the loss of a beloved teacher and the one whom they believed was the Son of God. This was the loss of the dream they had for Israel. Their dream for Israel disappeared the moment Jesus died. Their understanding of God’s work was limited by a physical understanding of redemption. They thought that Jesus would change everything and their lives would never be the same. They thought Roman rule would be over. Their failure to understand what God was doing illustrates itself in their failure to see Jesus standing right in front of them.

This sounds oddly familiar. They only see what they want to see in the person of Christ. Their expectations and their grief keep them from truly experiencing the fulfillment of God’s covenant. How often do we only see what we want in God and in our expectations of God’s role in our lives? How often do we define what redemption looks like?

So Jesus asks them an interesting question. He does not ask them how they are doing, where they are going, why they are traveling, what their names are, if they are Roman citizens, or how celebrating Passover was for them. Jesus asks them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” He asks them a question of immediacy. Jesus asks them what they are discussing that very moment of their journey.

Cleopas, one of the disciples, seems shocked that this stranger would ask what they were talking about. How could this man not know? He asks, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has taken place in these days?” Cleopas proposes the question of a person in the throes of grief. Have you ever been angry that the world continues to function normally and that no one understands what you’re experiencing? Don’t they all know? Don’t they all know that you are full of grief? Don’t they all see the invisible sign on your shirt that says, “Grief in Process?” Cleopas thought that this man should know because the city of Jerusalem has been torn apart by the last three days. Cleopas thought this man should know the workings of his heart and he scoffs at him. His question seems ironic to us as the audience; Jesus does indeed know why they are full of grief. Their grief and misconceptions about Jesus’s life, death and resurrection keeps them from encountering him on the road.

When our expectations or our grief blind us, we are more likely to miss God. Trying to figure out why something tragic happened has the potential to consume us. We can miss the moment when Jesus comes near to us and asks, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” We walk too fast. We churn through our grief, unaware that Jesus has come near to us. Jesus is interested in our experience of loss and does not shy away from asking the difficult, the obvious, or the simple. He asks the question we run away from

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asking. Jesus opens the door for Cleopas by asking this question. He begins the daring work of entering the disciples' grief. They do not recognize Jesus and perhaps this allows them to express their genuine feelings. The power of their walk to Emmaus would lessen if they knew who Jesus was. Perhaps they would not have invited God to enter their grief knowingly. They might have been too distracted by Jesus revealing himself to them that they wouldn't share their authentic feelings. They might have felt the need to prove themselves to Jesus--that they weren't like the others who betrayed, abandoned, or denied Jesus. But with Jesus's identity hidden, they are more vulnerable. They share their hearts. Sometimes, we can't handle God's presence. It is too much. We feel too exposed.

But when we invite God into our grief, healing has a place to happen. Jesus knew exactly what was going on. He did not ask the question so he would know what the pair was talking about that day. The question was for them. If Jesus had dismissed their conversation, he might have lost the disciples. Bringing their grief and anger into the light makes room for the next part of their journey on the road.

In the second part of this passage, Jesus tells them a story. Jesus calls them “foolish and slow of heart” because they did not understand that the Messiah would suffer and then enter glory. He tells them the story of himself because that is also their story. Jesus came to suffer and to heal, to fulfill promises and to transform reality. Not only to redeem the nation of Israel, but to change the entire world. Jesus uses the scriptures of the Hebrew people, Moses and the prophets.

Jesus does not ask if he can stay in Emmaus. He acts as if he will continue on the road. But the disciples “urged him strongly” to stay and have a meal. In first-century Palestinian culture, hospitality is a high social value. To invite someone in for a meal or to stay the night while traveling, whether a stranger or a close friend, was never a question. Jesus agrees to join them for dinner. Jesus breaks the bread at the meal. Traditionally, the host breaks the bread, not the guest. Jesus does so, paralleling the Last Supper. How beautiful and how painful to consider this breaking of the bread in light of the offering of his body and blood but a few days earlier. This seems like the second Last Supper or the first communion because Jesus reinstitutes remembrance and sacrament here as the risen God.

Rather than this be a meal where Jesus tells them that they will betray, abandon, and deny him, this is a meal of reconciliation and revelation. Their blindness dissipates, and in that mysterious moment, their eyes open. They see God. They almost missed Jesus entirely, but God gives them sight.

And with that sight, Jesus suddenly disappears. They return to Jerusalem. They leave the table in a hurry, full of excitement. Running out the door, almost forgetting to put their sandals back on, tripping on their robes, sprinting back to Jerusalem to proclaim the good news of the resurrected Christ.

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Often, in moments when we feel overwhelmed or we are walking too fast, we need someone to remind us of our story. We need someone to come near to us and ask, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” We need someone to come near and call us out when we’re being “foolish and slow of heart.” We need someone who will come and “break bread” with us. We need someone to share those moments of grief and celebration. Jesus is that someone.

We must proclaim the life changing news of God’s steadfast love and presence. We must be in the business of declaring resurrection. The beauty in that hopeful moment of declaring resurrection can turn into the power of transformation in their lives and our own. But first, we must share our Emmaus road stories with one another as we journey- the grief, the transformation, and the hope. Because both the death and the resurrection of Christ live inside each of us. If we have the courage to tell the entire story- to God, to one another, and to ourselves- we will be faithful witnesses to God’s work in us and in the world.

When I think of what kind of good news Jesus offers us today on the road to Emmaus, I keep thinking about how Jesus meets them while they are traveling between two places. They aren’t in Emmaus already when Jesus appears to them. He comes to them on the road as a stranger. He meets them in their transition between what was and what will be. And we are in that kind of place right now, too. We do not know when we will be able to go back to ‘life as usual.’ And, some conversations I’ve had in the past few weeks make it clear that there won’t be a ‘life as usual’ in the way that we think of it. Our world will not be the same when the coronavirus vaccine is finally created and we can start gathering in the sanctuary again for worship.

Rushing to return to normal is so tempting, isn’t it? Georgia, Oklahoma, and Alaska made this abundantly clear when they lifted shelter in place restrictions this week. And yet we can’t. We can’t rush back to Jerusalem yet and declare that Christ is risen. We can’t rush the process of creating a vaccine and say the resurrection has shown up in the form of modern medicine. We are collectively baffled. We are confused. We are grieving. But grief looks different when it happens in a community. Because we all lost something--several ‘somethings’--all at once. In one tectonic shift, we lost spring break trips, graduation ceremonies, employment, school, weddings. We lost our way of life, many of us, and it will not come back the way that we think it will.

But the good news is this: when we slow down enough to feel our grief and tell our stories, God is there. God is already there, walking beside us. We can look for signs of life in the graveyard of our former lives. Because God declares there is life in a place where others deny or disbelieve it.

So wherever you, God is near to you. Slow down long enough to look, no matter how painful. No matter how difficult. God will surprise you with the green hope of new leaves and the beauty of bird song. God will reveal herself to you in the kind voice of someone you love. God has already met you there in your neighbors around the fire. You are not alone.