

## “And They Recognized Him”

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Luke 24:13-35

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Third Sunday of Easter

Two friends, out for a walk. Two friends, out for a *long* walk. Two friends, out for a long and *emotional* walk. Two friends out for a walk that that ends with a *truly special* and *very surprising* supper.

It's the story called “the road to Emmaus.” It is one of my favorite stories in all of scripture. It's so ... human. It's so ... relatable. Perhaps that's because we don't really know who these two people were. Luke gives us the name of one of them: Cleopas. We know next-to-nothing about him. He doesn't appear in any other stories, at least not by name. He could have been in the background somewhere. Maybe he had been in the crowd listening to some of Jesus's sermons. Maybe he had been one of the five thousand whom Jesus had fed with five loaves of bread and two fish. Maybe he had part of the crowd waving palm branches when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem that last time. We have no idea where Cleopas came from, or what had inspired him to follow Jesus. We don't know anything about his career, or his family, or his age. We don't know if he was married or had any kids. All we know about Cleopas was that he was among the diverse group of people, men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile, who followed Jesus. It sounds like he was Jewish, because he refers to “*our* chief priests and leaders.” He had been in Jerusalem on the morning of Christ's resurrection. He hadn't gone to the tomb, but he had been present when the women came back from the tomb and announced that Jesus was alive. He had also probably been present in Jerusalem two days earlier, the day when Jesus had been crucified, although it's not clear if he was an eyewitness to that event. Did he live in Jerusalem? Or had he traveled there with Jesus? We don't know. And what was he doing on this day after the Sabbath – a work day – going for a long walk in the country? He was heading to a village called Emmaus, which Luke says was seven miles from Jerusalem. A two- or three-hour walk. We don't know where this village was. It is not mentioned anywhere else in the scriptures, or in any other work of literature from that time period. There were a couple other towns with the same name, but they were much further away. Both of those were towns with natural springs; this Emmaus probably had a natural spring too, because the name Emmaus literally means “warm springs.” Did Cleopas have business to do there? Did he have family there? What motivated him to undertake a seven-mile walk to Emmaus on that particular day, the day of Christ's resurrection, which to him at this point was still just a rumor? We simply don't know.

Nor do we know much of anything about Cleopas's companion. Like Cleopas, this person was probably Jewish, and certainly among Jesus's band of followers, but that's all we know for sure. We don't know their name. We don't even know their gender. Most people assume it was a man, but the text doesn't actually say that. It could have been a woman. Maybe Cleopas's wife. Or daughter. There has

been a wide range of speculation about this individual's identity. Simon? Nathanael? Nicodemus? Luke, the Evangelist? Philip the Deacon? James, the brother of Jesus? Mary, the wife of Clopas, who is mentioned in the Gospel of John? Could Cleopas and Clopas have been the same person? Maybe. We simply do not know who this person was. Maybe that was intentional. Maybe Luke deliberately *chose* not to give us this person's name. Maybe Luke *wanted* to leave it ambiguous. Maybe we are being invited to place *ourselves* in the story. Maybe, in some symbolic or metaphorical way, *we* are making this journey with Cleopas, *we* are taking that seven-mile walk, *we* are participating in that remarkable conversation. Maybe *we* get to sit down and break bread with Jesus. Maybe Jesus reveals himself to *us*.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's not jump to the conclusion of this story just yet. Cleopas and his companion are walking down that road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. What are they doing while they walk? They were "talking with each other about all these things that had happened." What things? What things had happened? All those climactic events of the preceding few days. Jesus, their beloved teacher, "a prophet," they call him, "mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," the one whom they hoped would "redeem Israel," was dead. Murdered. Publicly executed, in the brutal Roman way, as if he had been a rebel, a criminal, an insurrectionist, an enemy of the state. He had been betrayed by one of his closest followers; he had been put on trial, not just once but twice; he had been convicted of blasphemy, beaten, whipped, and ultimately crucified, before a cheering crowd, while at the same time, a notorious criminal, a murderer and an insurrectionist, had gotten off scot-free. Jesus's followers were not only *grieving* the loss of their beloved teacher – they were also *traumatized* by the events of the previous few days. Now, just two days later, there were rumors that he was somehow still *alive*. Cleopas and his companion had a *lot* to talk about, and process, as they walked down that road.

Another traveler joins them on the road. A man whom they do not know. At least, they do not *think* they know him. This new traveler asks, "Hey, what are you all talking about?" Cleopas wonders, "Haven't you heard? How could you possibly not know what has happened?" Luke says that he asked: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" How could anyone have been anywhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem and not know about all those events that involved not only the most important and powerful religious leaders among the Jews, not only the Roman Governor, but also a street preacher who had amassed a huge following and had generated all sorts of controversy? Cleopas is incredulous. *How could anybody not know about all that?*

Well, *we* know that this so-called "stranger" was very well aware of everything that had happened – because it had happened to him. *He* was the one who had been betrayed, arrested, beaten, condemned, and crucified. *He* was the one who had died. *He* was the one who had been raised. But he didn't want *them* to know that yet. So he concealed his identity. He appeared to be *someone else*.

How many times does it happen in our life that Jesus is walking *right next to us* as we go through our *grief* and our *loss* and our *heartache* ... and we don't realize that he's there? When you've lost your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your husband or your wife, your own beloved child? When you've lost your job, your income, your savings? When you've lost your health – your body or your mind? When you've lost your marriage? When you've lost your sense of purpose, or your own self-identity? When you've lost your way? When somebody has done something to you, when someone has really *hurt* you? When you are *in very deep pain*? When your heart is breaking, or has broken? When you just can't stop crying? How many times does it happen in your life that Jesus is walking *right*

*next to you* as you go through all that ... *listening to you, comforting you, caring for you, loving you ...* and you don't realize that he is there, *for you?* Every trial we go through, my friends, every *single* one ... Jesus is *right there*. Walking with you, step by step, as you make your journey out of the darkness and back into the light. He is *right there*, standing *by your side*, even if you can't tell that he's really there.

For Cleopas and his companion, it feels like their hearts are on fire. Their hearts are *burning*. This stranger, this new companion, he listens, he comforts, and he *explains*. Everything that has just happened, all that they have just gone through – it has all been foretold. It's all there, in the scriptures. There are a *lot* things in there that don't make sense ... until, suddenly, they do. This new companion helps them see the scriptures in a whole new light. He shows them the *pattern* in the *weaving* that they hadn't yet seen. They discover a *depth* in the scriptures they didn't know was there. This is the same thing that happens to us, as we go deeper, as we see something in the scriptures we have never seen before; as we look at a familiar passage and see it with new eyes, or at an unfamiliar passage and we think, "Wow, I didn't know that was in there," or a passage we don't like or that makes us uncomfortable, and we learn something that makes us take another look at it from a different angle. All of that has happened to me more times than I can count. Every time I think I've got a handle on something in the scriptures, or every time I feel like I will *never* understand a particular passage of scripture, I discover *more*. Cleopas and his companion were having a moment like that, suddenly seeing the scriptures that were familiar to them from a whole new lens, thanks to the gentle teaching of their newfound friend on the road. He opened the scriptures to them in a new way. And everything began to make *sense*.

They reach Emmaus. Their new companion gets ready to part with them, but they like his company. Who *wouldn't* like Jesus's company? They invite him to stay with them. He accepts their invitation. Jesus *always* accepts our invitations. Every time we say, "Hey, come, spend some time with me," Jesus says, "I will," because Jesus *always* has time for us, Jesus *always* wants to be with us. Jesus is never in a hurry, and he never has to be anywhere else. Unlike us, he can be *everywhere*, all at once.

They sit down to eat. A normal, typical supper, it would have been ... except ... it wasn't. There wasn't anything normal, or typical, about *that* meal. Because this new companion took a loaf of bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them, *and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him* – and if those words sound familiar to you, *well, they should!* – because those are the words we say when we gather around the table of the Lord, month after month, year after year. I said those words to you last week, when we gathered around the table: "According to Luke, when our risen Lord was at table with his disciples, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." I say those words *every single time*. When Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to them, Cleopas and his companion recognized Jesus for *who he really is*.

You can imagine their astonishment. Jesus! Their beloved teacher, whom they thought was dead, whom they had heard might be alive, was *indeed* alive. Alive ... and he had come to spend some time with *them*. Two people who were essentially "nobody"s in the Gospel story. They hadn't done *anything* to merit the attention of the Gospel writers. But they *had* merited the attention of Jesus.

Because that is what Jesus does. He will come to be with *anybody*. He will come to comfort *anybody*. He will come to teach *anybody*. He will come to surprise *anybody*. He will love ... *anybody*.

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