

## **“Resurrection Living: Jesus Gives Us Faith for the Road”**

**Psalm 116:12-19; Luke 24:13-35**

**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

We are at the Third Sunday of Easter this week, and our lessons are focused on the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. This week, we have the beloved story of the disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

I'm glad a road figures prominently in this story. I like roads. I enjoy taking trips on them to meet people, to see new sights, and to enjoy a meal out. Of course, we can't do those things right now, so we'll have to let the disciples in the story do them for us this week.

Roads have always been important for human beings. They connect us, connect communities, for the purposes of business, security, social interaction and just plain fun. A lot can happen to you on the road. Think, for a moment, about the road trips you've taken. Maybe there's a trip that really stands out for you. What do you remember most about that trip?

- Was it the events you took part in—skiing in the mountains, camping in the woods, sightseeing at Disneyworld, or an early morning walk along a beach?
- Or was it the people you encountered—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends—people you care about and love to be with?
- Or was it the sights along the way—I can still remember my first visit to the Grand Canyon in Arizona; on another trip, seeing the Pacific Ocean in California; and, my first walk to the Thurmont Overlook in Catoctin Mountain National Park.

Road trips. They can be a mixture of fun and adventure, business and pleasure, safety and danger, commitment and escape. A trip by road—or any journey, for that matter—can change us. People who set out on a journey often undergo a transformation along the way—they aren't the same people, in many respects, at the end as when they left. We see that time and again in works of literature, plays and movies. One example is the story of *Les Miserables*, a novel by Victor Hugo later made into an award-winning musical. The central character, Jean Valjean, begins the story as a miserable thief. As the story progresses, he changes to become a loving man who meets an orphan and raises her as his own daughter.

Think again about some of those trips you've taken. Is there one that gave you some new insight, or was there some experience that changed you, made you think differently or act differently about something? Today's story of the Emmaus Road is a journey of transformation.

- In the beginning, two disciples of Jesus, a man named Cleopas and an unnamed disciple set out from Jerusalem on the first day of the week.
- It is the third day since the death and burial of Jesus.
- They were going to Emmaus, a town we don't know much about, only that it was about 7 miles from the City.

There's something else we don't know: Why were these two disciples headed there?

- Could it be Emmaus was their home and they were returning there after the Passover festival?
- Perhaps they were going there on business—it was, after all, the first day of the work week.
- Maybe Emmaus was their first stop on the long road back to Galilee.

Or perhaps Emmaus was just a place to get away to after all the pain and horror they had witnessed in Jerusalem and the death of their beloved Jesus. Frederick Buechner, an influential Presbyterian writer and theologian, thought of Emmaus in this way; he went as far as to suggest that we all have our own Emmaus, a place we get away to when life turns unpleasant. Buechner wrote Emmaus is:

The place we go in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say... ‘It makes no difference anyway.’...Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car...or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one...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.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Emmaus is the place we head toward when we lose our faith; when we’ve lost hope; when we reach that point of saying, “I’m done. No more!” Maybe Emmaus is the place we look forward to because looking backward anymore is just too painful. Whatever it was that took those disciples on the road, they walked and as they walked, they talked about the recent events they had witnessed in Jerusalem.

After a while, a man joined them. We are told this was Jesus, the exact wording is, “Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him,” so the disciples did not know it was him. Jesus asked them “what things” they were discussing, and the disciples stopped, and with sad looks on their faces, they recounted the events surrounding the death of Jesus.

- They told him of their smashed dreams: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”
- They told him how he died: crucifixion at the impetus of the religious leaders and the hands of the Roman occupiers.
- And they told him the strange stories some women related of an empty tomb and angels—wishful thinking, no doubt, stories they clearly did not believe.

Now at this point, you might expect the stranger to offer a few words of sympathy, some kind of consolation for the loss of their friend and Teacher. These disciples, these two people, are clearly hurting. They are grieving a deep loss. But instead of condolences, the stranger chastised them for being “foolish...and slow of heart” to believe what the prophets had proclaimed. And then, as they walked and talked, the incognito Jesus opened the scriptures to them and explained how Moses and the prophets testified all about...well, himself.

Still perplexed and with night coming on, the disciples invited the stranger to stay with them at an inn. It is here that their journey away from the “late unpleasantness” of Jerusalem takes a huge turn.

- They sit down at the table for a meal.
- Bread is brought.
- The stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples.
- And immediately they recognize their traveling companion as Jesus, who then vanishes from their sight.

Here, in Luke’s masterful telling, is the moment of transformation. Here...

- The two disciples suddenly knew they were in the presence of a very much alive Jesus.
- They have gone from the beginning of the story where “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” to “then their eyes were opened.”
- Their grief turned to joy.
- Even though night was falling, their spirits were rising within in them as they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”
- And they raced back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the others, who, it turned out, had their own good news to share about Jesus. It all amounted to the same thing—Jesus is alive!

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: Seabury, 1966), 85-86. Quoted in R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume IX, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 482.

In this story, two disciples who sought escape from the awful events of Jesus' death, discovered what so many other people have found over the course of their lives: Jesus gives us faith for the road. This faith is a matter of trusting God to be with us wherever we go.

We see an example of it in today's lesson from the Psalms, the psalmist places his trust in God by "[calling] on the name of the Lord," offering praise and thanksgiving because he knows God's goodness. (Psalm 116)

Faith, according to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 1:1) In other words, we don't need to see in order to believe. Above all, faith is a gift.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith," writes the Apostle Paul, "and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Now, for faith to be worth our time, it's got to be "road-worthy"; that is, it has to be able to travel where we go and help us through whatever we face in life. Many people draw comfort from knowing God through Jesus—that is our faith, that Jesus is the risen Son of God who gives eternal life to all who believe. And there are many people who cannot accept the idea of a crucified Savior who rose from the dead. It's not hard to see why.

Human wisdom says people who die stay dead, and that includes people who get crucified. From that standpoint, that's all she wrote. Game over. But while some people are ready to write "The End," God rewrote the story. The Resurrection of Jesus is God's "To Be Continued."<sup>2</sup>

My friends, God raised Jesus from the dead to say to us, "It isn't over till I say it's over; and it's not over." That's what those disciples discovered at Emmaus.

- They were filled with doubt and uncertainty.
- They had a hard time accepting a risen savior.
- Even though there were "slow of heart to believe," Jesus didn't give up on them.
- And Jesus doesn't give up on us when we have doubts and uncertainties and are slow to believe. And that is good news.

The Jesus those disciples encountered is the same one who meets us on the roads of life, wherever we may go. This Jesus is not content to leave us trudging along the way, saddened by the hardness and harshness of life, and living without hope. This Jesus transforms us from a people without hope to those who have new hope; but more than that, we have the assurance of God's constant love for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus gives us faith for the road.

Let me share a story with you about a British missionary and evangelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the name of Lesslie Newbigin. He was at a conference once and many noticed his positive attitude toward life.

Newbigin was asked whether, as a Christian, he was an optimist or a pessimist. He replied: "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead."<sup>3</sup>

For me, that sums up the faith we have in the God who gives life.

Today, let us not be optimists or pessimists.

Today, let us simply be faith-filled followers of Jesus Christ by affirming the age-old confession of the church. This is the first confession, the confession before all others, the witness that sets us apart from all the rest: "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"

May the Risen Christ give you all faith for the road, this day, and always.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 280.

<sup>3</sup> *AZ Quotes*, article on internet, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1024740>, accessed 24 April 2020.