

It always startles me to remember that the Emmaus story is an *Easter* story. According to Luke's Gospel, this story happens on Resurrection Sunday- just later that day. Today's text was selected because it is the last one in our Lenten sermon series entitled "Meeting Jesus At The Table." As we have seen, meals so characterize Jesus' ministry. In Luke's Gospel eating is a radical act because it breaks down cultural barriers. One scholar claims, "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal" (Robert J. Korris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*). But I digress and now we're all hungry. Luke is the only gospel writer who tells us the story of what happened on that road, but everyone has walked it at one time or another. Every one of us, regardless of identity or circumstance, knows this road. Not only have we walked it; we've lost our way on it. It is the road you walk when your team has lost, when your candidate has been defeated, when you can't find affordable housing, when you've been diagnosed with an illness, when your loved one has died; it's the long road back to the empty house or shelter or to recovery when all you want to do is to use again in order to escape the pain; it's the piles of unopened mail or the discovery that all you have to your name is gone because you thought you left your bags well enough hidden but they were stolen; it's the road to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again. The road is the road to Emmaus. It is the road of deep disappointment and that's where we find Cleopas and his travel companion in today's story. It is seven miles to Emmaus from Jerusalem, so we can guess that it takes roughly two hours to walk seven miles. That is how long these two disciples have to talk over the roller coaster events of the past week: the crowds shouting, "Hosanna" and waving palm branches to then shouting "Crucify him!" and Jesus was arrested, mocked, spat on, flogged and hung on a cross to die the death of a

criminal. And now three days later, there's the women's vision of angels and an empty grave. They're absolutely flattened; the hope wind is out of their sails. The Lord they staked their lives on, the Messiah they thought would change the world, had died the most humiliating death imaginable, and his promises of a new kingdom seem as dead as Jesus. And to make matters worse, there is now an empty grave and Jesus' body is missing. They had hoped for so much more than this.

These are the things they're discussing on this disappointing and sacred road when Jesus approaches them- though they don't know it's Jesus. Jesus- as far as they know- is dead. Yes, there is a rumored resurrection, but they aren't looking for him among the living. Who would do that? Even with Jesus by their side...they are oblivious to anything but their disbelief and grief. "In a sentence no English teacher would allow to stand, Luke recounts, 'but their eyes were kept from recognizing him' (v. 16). Did you catch the passive voice? This grammatical construction hides the reason they can't recognize him. Did Jesus look different after the resurrection? Was his face transformed" (Eric Barreto, workingpreacher.org)? We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus engages them with a question. "What are you two discussing as you walk?", he asks. And herein lies the irony. These two disciples are incredulous. Who doesn't know what has taken place? Haven't you heard the news or seen what's trending on Twitter? They voice their dashed hopes.

"Here's what you're leaving out," Jesus seems to say as he responds to them. Jesus outlines the meaning and significance of his own death, starting from Moses and the prophets. He goes on to say it was 'necessary' that Jesus would suffer,

die, rise, and be lifted up into glory. Yet, they still don't recognize him. "But when Jesus does the most Jesus thing of all, everything changes. I wonder what we think is the most characteristic activity of Jesus. When we imagine Jesus, what is he doing? For many, he is on the cross. For others, he may be preaching to a crowd or healing the sick. For others, Jesus may be enthroned at the right hand of God. For Luke, however, Jesus' most characteristic activity is eating with others at the table. Making you hungry again, aren't I? Notice here that it isn't Jesus' teaching that opens their eyes. It's not his presence. It is his sharing bread with his friends. It's his blessing of food. In this sharing bread at an ordinary table, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' transformative kingdom" (Barreto). But what prevented them from recognizing Jesus this whole time? Some say it was the divine passive. "In other words, giving God the credit for preventing the disciples' comprehension. And that is certainly possible. However, I find it more compelling to believe it is the disciples' expectations that prevent their recognition. This is not the context they expected for an encounter with Jesus" (Greg Carey, workingpreacher.org).

Yesterday's opinion writer in *The New York Times*, Esau McCaulley, a NT Professor from Wheaton, wrote, "I have never been a big fan of hope. It's a demanding emotion that insists on changing you. Hope pulls you out of yourself and into the world, forcing you to believe more is possible. Isn't it easier to believe that everyone who loves us has some secret agenda? That racism will forever block the creation of what Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community? That the gun lobby will always overwhelm every attempt at reform? That poverty is a fact of human existence? Despair allows us to give up our resistance and rest awhile" ([link](#)). You can feel today's story shift from despair to hope- the seesaw of

the road of life and faith. “Maybe the rumors are true? Maybe there is a reason to resurrect their/our crucified hope” (Taylor)? It is only in hindsight- after Jesus had come and gone- that they realized their hearts were burning inside them when Jesus talked about scripture. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she overheard two children having regarding this story. “How do you know when you are blind?” one of them asked. “You don’t,” the other one said. “You only know afterward, when you can see.” The inability of the two disciples to recognize Jesus does not keep Christ from meeting them where they are on the road. No. “Jesus doesn’t limit his post-resurrection appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the ones in despair. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him.” (Taylor).

This is a strange story in its own right. Upon the travelers arrival at their home, they have to nearly force Jesus to stay with them. The verb here means to “twist someone’s arm” or “to compel” (Henrich). Jesus of course stays, yet he, not the person whose home it is, becomes the host at the table.

Who knows? “A glimpse of the Lord may propel us new confidence, new hope, even a new way of remembering. Cleopas and his companion, like most of us, don’t even know that their eyes have been closed until suddenly they are opened. “The Emmaus story speaks to the power of the small and the commonplace to reveal the divine. God shows up during a quiet evening walk on a backwater road. God is made known at the table. God reveals God’s self through Jesus when we take, bless, break, and give. God is present in the rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days” (Thomas). I saw him last Wednesday in the coffee line in

the Mercy Center. I hadn't seen him in a few months. I've teased him in the past about calling him by his real name because he usually prefers to be called by his street name but when I called him by his street name, he reached down in his shirt and pulled out a name tag on a chain around his neck. He looked up at me, smiling and said, "My name is Barry (changed to protect this person). I've been sober now for 62 days, and I have seen the Lord at work! I have a new lease on life!" I mean if you knew this person six months ago, he was a different person: a sad outlook on life. He told me one time that he had a dumpster that he had claimed to sleep in. The catch was there was no lid to this dumpster. He had a blanket that he threw over the top but when the rains came, the blanket would eventually collapse, and he and his things would get soaked. But on this day, he wore a new confidence...he claimed an authentic hope that I had yet to see in him, recognizing that he was a beloved child of God and worthy of sobriety and whatever else that lead him to freedom. He said that his eyes had been open. He was tired of being on the streets and living with the heavy chains of addiction along with mental health challenges. He wants better for himself and credits the power of God in his life to help him get there. He has seen the Risen Lord!

Life is a windy road, filled with ups and downs. Like Barry, we need a faith-filled hope in which to cling. Our hope is in a God who raised Christ from the dead! Theoretically, we experience MINI resurrections (little Easters) each Sunday...and yet, most of us don't think about our lives or our faith in this way. We lose hope; we don't recognize our risen Lord working in and walking with us. **Nadia Bolz Weber**, a Lutheran pastor and a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, says, *And when it comes down to it, I want hope. That is to say, I want God. Because a hope that **does not** disappoint looks less like being idealistic about ourselves and more*

*like being idealistic about God's redeeming work in the world. It's **a hope that comes not** from naïve optimism, but from being wrong and falling short, and experiencing betrayal and being a betrayer and it comes from suffering and the grave and what feels like a night from which dawn could never emerge and then how God reaches into the graves we dig ourselves and each other and again loves us back to life. Nadia continues, **The Easter hope we have** is a hope that can only come from a God who has experienced birth, and love and friendship and lepers and prostitutes and betrayal and suffering and death and burial and a decent into hell itself. **Only a God who has born suffering himself can bring us any real hope of resurrection.** The Christian faith is one that does not pretend things aren't bad. This is a faith that does not offer platitudes to those who lost children this week to suicide or gun violence or a tornado. **This is a faith that produces a defiant hope that God is still writing the story and that despite darkness a light shines and that God can redeem our crap and that beauty matters and that despite every disappointing thing we have ever done or that we have ever endured, that there is no hell from which resurrection is impossible** ([here](#)).*

“If the Emmaus story tells us anything, it tells us that the risen Christ is not confined in any way by the seeming smallness of our lives. Wherever and whenever we make room, Jesus comes. ‘But we had hoped.’ Yes, we had. Of course we had. And yet. The stranger who is the Savior still meets us on the disappointing, sacred road to Emmaus. Back to McCaulley, the contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*. He writes, “That indestructibility of hope might be the central and most radical claim of Easter — that three days after Jesus was killed, he returned to his disciples physically and that made all the difference. Easter, then, is not a metaphor for new beginnings; it is about

encountering the person who, despite every disappointment we experience with ourselves and with the world, gives us a reason to carry on." We had hoped and we still have hope. The guest who becomes our host, our Lord and Savior, has risen from the dead and meets us at the table and on the road of life. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. And he is no less risen on the road to Emmaus than he is anywhere else. Look for him. Listen for him" (Thomas). Christ's table is the place he has promised to be, and this is the place he returns to meet us again and again. Alleluia and Amen.