

The Emmaus Road narrative is one of the most familiar—at least I hope it is—and one of the most beautiful stories in the entire New Testament. What starts as a stroll with a stranger ends with an experience affirming the miracle of the Resurrection. Emmaus was a village about 7 miles southeast of Jerusalem. It was the site of Judah Maccabee’s triumph over the oppressors of the Jewish people, the kind of military victory many had hoped Jesus would deliver. Interestingly, archaeologists today can’t even find the ruins of Emmaus. It vanished without a trace. As a historical footnote this tells us that the destination was not really that significant. Emmaus has not endured. Its glory gone. It is the journey with Jesus that really counts. It is Christ’s appearing in the lives of these two believers that is the bottom line of the whole story.

All of us except school age students, I suppose, will remember the horror of 9/11. Many in this country still grieve the losses of that day. Wrap up all of the grief from 9/11, combine it with crushed faith, dashed hopes and destroyed dreams, and we get a sense of the mood on the road to Emmaus. Despair, defeat and dejection weighed them down. The very last thing they expected to see was the risen Jesus. And so, they didn’t see him.

The fact that Jesus went unrecognized is a very, very significant lesson that resonates down the centuries. It tells us that Jesus is journeying with us today, even when we don’t recognize him. It tells us that if we don’t look for him, we won’t see him either. At the breaking of the bread, Jesus suddenly called an end to the disciples’ pity party. **He awoke them to their salvation.** He revealed himself as the risen Conqueror of sin and death. Remember the situation over the past few days? It was heavy with a disturbing dominance of evil. Pontius Pilate signed Jesus’ death warrant after an unjust trial. Priests stirred up the mob to shout bloodthirsty cries of “Crucify him!” Backed by the military might of the Roman Empire, soldiers heartlessly drive spikes into Jesus’ hands and feet. And Satan, the prince of darkness, sneers with perverse glee as God’s Son hangs, seemingly helpless, on a wooden Cross. Now the disciples cower behind locked doors in Jerusalem, hiding fearfully against the night.

Is this what a picture of God’s salvation looks like? Gloomy, wouldn’t you say? Notice that in this story, the gloriously risen Savior does not intrude. He doesn’t come cartwheeling down the road, knocking the disciples off their feet. He modestly joins them on the path and in their conversation. They set the pace and he listens. He wants to know what is important to them. He obviously cares; then and now. What matters to us, matters to him. No issue, no concern is off limits. In Christ we may not always get what we want, but we always get what we need. **So, let’s add salvation to the picture today.**

Surely, they talked about mundane things—taxes too high, wages too low, kids too wild—but more probably about their friend, Jesus—his teaching, his healing, the way he was able to love everyone he met. Was it wise for him to have come to the city of Jerusalem, knowing the authorities were out to get him? Why did he take such a risk at the temple, overturning money changers’ tables and shouting at the priests about the temple being a den of thieves? If only he had kept a lower profile. If only he had not done this or that. If only...

Suddenly, Cleopas and friend are no longer alone. Someone walks with them and he asks, “What’s up with yinz?” or whatever the Aramaic equivalent would be. They stop dead in their tracks. “What’s up? What’s UP???” Are you kidding me? The next verse reads, “*Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?*” (24:18)

“*What things?*” the stranger asks. Cleopas and his buddy begin to share. With a sadness tinged by anger, they described the events that had made them so heavy of heart—their disappointment with religious leaders, their distress at the political system which could be so easily manipulated by evil men, their despair at the loss of someone who had personified their hope for the future. Sounds very much like something we might read in today’s newspaper. Those things happen almost every day in every century.

But something different was going on here. Along with all the rage they were venting, they had that strange story they heard from some of their women friends about an empty tomb, a vision of angels, and a risen Lord.

Then why did Cleopas and his companion leave Jerusalem? I would think that news about the tomb being empty might have prompted a change of plans. For whatever reason, they did not go to the garden to find out first hand, but, as they told their fellow traveler, “*Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus*” (v. 24). Did Cleopas and the other traveler not believe the report of resurrection because it was probably just wishful thinking, or more likely, grave robbers? Otherwise, why not stay in the city to see if Jesus would drop in? At every turn, Cleopas and the other disciple miss the point. They think they know where Jesus is—dead and buried. They are not prepared for a *risen* Lord, who walks with them along a common road and speaks to them of common things. Then, it is in the simplest action of all—the breaking of bread for an ordinary meal—that it dawns on them who this is.

The question again is: *What is it that keeps their eyes from recognizing Jesus, the one whom we would think they would yearn to see more than anyone in the world?* I think the answer is as simple as this: They did not EXPECT to see him. The same thing may have happened to you too at some time or another. Have you ever been in an airport terminal or in a large crowd in a strange city, and seen someone who looks more than a little familiar—in fact, they are the spitting image of someone you know quite well—but you were reluctant to approach them and say hello because you weren’t CERTAIN it was him or her? Their appearance is totally unexpected, so the result is that you aren’t willing to trust your own eyes.

We Americans love comeback stories, usually the stuff of sports movies, complete with sweeping music and tearful embraces. But last Sunday America witnessed one IRL—in real life. Tiger Woods won the Masters, the most important of all annual golf tournaments, at the Augusta National Golf Course. It was his first major victory since 2008 and his first Masters win since 2005. Fans around the world, and Woods himself, were bowled over by what was hailed as one of the greatest sports comeback stories of all time.

Bet I can top that story. I’ll also bet if the two travelers gave any credence to the rumors of Jesus’ resurrection, they would expect him to make a comeback with the help of a company of angels. The last thing they expected is to see the Lord himself overtaking them on a dusty road. They’re not prepared for

Christ in such an ordinary place. We're the same. We prefer to meet Jesus on our own terms; according to our expectations; from a safe distance, removed from our daily life. We treat him like company at a formal dinner party, not like a friend we call to meet for coffee.

Is the problem that we have left Jesus in the tomb? Cemeteries are supposed to convey serenity. Apart from the occasional burial and the weekly lawnmowing, nothing ever happens in a cemetery. Would that be a good place for Jesus? Where nothing much happens? We're often content to go it alone where life is really lived. **Please oh please, don't leave the risen, living Lord who brings us salvation in the tomb.** The resurrection of Jesus beckons us to live as risen people in the reality of the Easter message. It's the best news we've heard in a long time, and its news to be shared. The two Emmaus disciples could not keep the good news to themselves once they realized Jesus was raised from the dead. They hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others what they had seen and heard. Ever since then, the church in the world has been busy spreading the wonderful news.

As I look out on those of us worshipping here today, I'm reminded that not one of us could have made it this far without the guiding, loving, eye-opening presence of the Risen Jesus who appeared on the road to Emmaus. Wherever our life's journey may take us from here—through twists and turns, dangers and detours—I pray that the Lord of Life may guide us on our journey home, and today give us a renewed appreciation of the salvation he brings.

It's fascinating to me that in Luke 24 we see that **Jesus' cure for the broken heart is to tell the two travelers the story of God's salvation.** He starts with Moses and finishes with himself. We too need to hear that story. We too need to hear that mishaps and tragedies are not a reason to bail out. They are simply a reason to sit tight. Corrie ten Boom who survived the horror of a Nazi concentration camp used to say, "When the train goes through a tunnel and the world gets dark, do you jump out? Of course not. You sit still and trust the engineer to get you through." (Max Lucado, *He Still Moves Stones*, p. 91)

Why did Luke have to tell the story of two dejected and defeated disciples on the road to Emmaus? So, we'd know the engineer still has control of the train.

What's the way to deal with discouragement? What's the cure for disappointment? Go back to the story. Read it again and again. Be reminded that we're not the first people to weep. And we're not the first person to need help. Read the story and remember, their story is our story!

Is the challenge too great? *Read the story.* That's us crossing the Red Sea with Moses. Have too many worries? *Read the story.* That's us receiving heavenly food with the Israelites. Are the wounds too deep? *Read the story.* That's us with Joseph, forgiving our family for betraying us. Do enemies seem too strong? *Read the story.* That's us marching with Jehoshaphat into a battle already won. Are life's disappointments too heavy? *Read the story of the Emmaus-bound disciples.* The Savior they thought was dead now walked beside them. What an amazing comeback story! Then they say that something happened in their hearts: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (24:32).

Next time you're disappointed, don't panic. Don't jump off the train. Don't give up. Be patient and let God remind you he's still in control. When it comes to the story of our salvation, it ain't over till it's over.

“Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*” Amen.