

## GETTING OUT OF TOWN

The Rev. Dr. Craig Malbon  
Luke 24:13-35

### *Luke, chapter 24, verses 13 to 35.*

**13** Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. **14** They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. **15** As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; **16** but they were kept from recognizing him.

**17** He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. **18** One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

**19** “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. **20** The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; **21** but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. **22** In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning **23** but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. **24** Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

**25** He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” **27** And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

**28** As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. **29** But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

**30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. **32** They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

**33** They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together **34** and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” **35** Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

The central question posed by today’s narrative from Luke 24 is this, “how do we apprehend Jesus, the Risen Christ?” Distilled to the basics, perhaps the question is, “how do we see?” To see “properly” our eyes accommodate an image to maximize acuity, i.e., the detail. As our eyes age, typically we need corrected vision made possible by optical lens/contact lenses. We assist by moving closer to the computer screen or our 72” HDTV at home. For close light work we use microscopes whose objectives may require 22 separate lens used in unison. For distant light work, we have large-array telescopes that collect light from objects that are light-years away. So, one key is the lens we employ for the task of discernment.

Even with the proper lens, often we still need the object of investigation to be pointed out. Using a telescope, try to find Venus or Mars without the help of a celestial map and experienced guide. Looking for a brown creeper in a tree or maybe a Spring peeper by a brook? You likely will need the lens and some help to point you in the right direction. Our travelers, Cleopas and friend, appear in this narrative to be woefully lacking in either lens or pointers. They are essentially non-observant travelers trying to “get out of town” to anywhere but Jerusalem. Clearly in despair, dejected, and frowning down at the ground is their current outlook. And why not? Their “so-called” Messiah was crucified, dead, and buried. Three days later all they know from being there in Jerusalem is that the garden tomb where Jesus was laid to rest is empty. They state emphatically, “They did not see Jesus”, meaning a risen Jesus. If faith was their lens to the crucifixion and resurrection, Cleopas and friend were

without it. They had little or no faith in spite of all that they had heard and perhaps witnessed in the ministry of Jesus.

The narrative in Luke gains more interest for us when a stranger joins them in their journey set to Emmaus. Like a good pastor, this stranger senses their spiritual emptiness and counters with the Word of God and a retelling of the scriptures that had been foretold and fulfilled about the Messiah. In their joint despair, Cleopas and friend cannot seem to even raise their heads to apprehend the stranger now with them. They epitomize the dejection and despair about all that happened in the last three days in Jerusalem. They just wanted to get out of town, to any place other than Jerusalem. So they set out to a small backwater village about seven miles northwest from Jerusalem, to Emmaus. Anonymity is what they seek, not discernment, so the nature of the stranger is of little interest to Cleopas and friend.

Night is approaching and these backwater roads are very unsafe at night. The stranger speaks of traveling on alone, but this alarms Cleopas and friend. "Stay with us, the day is nearly over". Demonstrating hospitality for the stranger, they invite the stranger to break bread with them. The stranger seems to accept their offer only with resistance, but succumbs to their hospitality. In an inn of some kind the meal is being laid out before them. Cleopas and friend remain preoccupied with their despair and dejection, likely with faces looking down at the table. We can imagine the three sitting at the table when the stranger picks up the bread, give thanks to God, breaks and distribute the bread. Perhaps their visual field was lifted to apprehend the bread raised for a blessing? Perhaps the light in the inn flickered to as to illuminate the face of the stranger? This ritual and the rabbinical manner of the stranger's schooling of the two suddenly offers them the lens that they need most right now, the lens of faith. For then, their eyes were opened!!! They recognized the stranger. The pieces fit together and the ID is confirmed in their minds through the lens of faith, i.e., the stranger is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Risen One!!!

Verse 31, "THEN THEIR EYES WERE OPENED--- THEY RECOGNIZED JESUS AND HE DISAPPEARED FROM THEIR SIGHT!!!!" This verse, Friends, is the core text in this morning's Lectionary reading. That narrative was 1<sup>st</sup> C Palestine. What about in 21<sup>st</sup> C Setauket, does it speak to us anymore? Ever have your own Emmaus moment? Life and times so horribly bad, escape may be the first desire. You want to get out of town. Maybe you have faced the music, you think, but you just cannot spend another moment in your "Jerusalem". A change of venue may be what you desire, to clear your thoughts or maybe to clear your sight? Clashes within families, broken relationships, unraveling of promises, unraveling of the lies that seemed so innocuous when said, shame and humiliation, these are the products common to human fallenness. Whether the perpetrator or victim, you just want to get out of town. Sometimes don't we all want to get out of town?

We Christians say we believe. We believe in Jesus. We believe in Immanuel, "God who is with us", at our side, walking with us, perhaps propping us up at such moments, or even perhaps carrying us in His arms. This narrative of the Road to Emmaus, steeped in the Easter message asks us about how we look for God's presence in Christ in our daily lives. Not once a year, as a commemoration, but daily, daily when do we apprehend Jesus in our midst in the very fabric of our lives? Maybe we are downtrodden, our faces to the ground, unable or unwilling to look away from the ground. When we turn away from the trials and tribulations of this broken world, friends, what has happened to our lens, our faith, our professed faith in the Risen One? We can no longer "see", we feel alone. We can no longer seem to find God in our lives!!! Replete with fallenness and suffering sometimes, at the very moment when Christ can be most active in our lives, we lose the capacity to "see", we have lost our "lens", we are on our own road to Emmaus. Has God turned away from us? Or have we, in trying for find a way out of town, turned away from God, no longer able to see Jesus in our midst? In the absence of the lens of faith, we are blind, we are lost, and our lives become chaotic. How can we find God in Christ Jesus in such a miserable and blind state? Often we cannot. The chaos continues, exhaustion ensues, and we become a self-fulfilling prophecy of degrading faith.

We think we know what the Risen One might look like? As you read this narrative carefully you may ask yourself the following question: is Jesus the stranger on the road to Emmaus, or, is the stranger reconciled as Jesus when the three share a meal in the communion of faith? Absent a positive ID of Christ Jesus, it maybe either one, or both are true. In this the afterglow of the Easter morn, I want to you think deeply about this issue.

Which was it, Jesus the Christ, or Christ Jesus in the face of a total stranger that brought them to a communion of faith? How is your lens of faith? Is it strong and polished, or weak and dull? A strong, polished lens is a “growing faith.” Our faith grows as we apprehend and internalize the fullest meaning of the resurrection and of what the Passion of Christ on Calvary means to you in your every day lives.

Let me, if you will, bear testimony and bear witness for you. I have never seen/witnessed the Risen One *per se*, but I have sensed and apprehended “God among us” in many powerful, transformative ways. I recall a patient who was about 80 years old, who was actively dying, someone with whom I had many conversations about death. He was awaiting his son and granddaughter to arrive, after that worrisome call from his bedside. I left the room to check at the Nurses’ station about the arrival of his family. Gone for about 5 min, when I returned he had passed. Not ten minutes later his son arrived hurriedly with coat still on. I shared the news with him and he collapsed in my arms. When he had composed himself, we talked and prayed while viewing his father at the bedside. So many things left to say. Yet, I convinced him that prayer was the next best option for him to share his feelings, emptiness, and loss as well as deep thanks for the love he shared with his father. Not twenty minutes later, his only granddaughter arrived, straight from college in the City. She approached and viewing her father’s face, knew that her beloved grandfather had gone on ahead. We two were then left alone and prayed the words that could no longer be shared as planned. In some strange way I knew about this young woman and her father, from my conversations with the patient. I could speak of his love for his family, son, and granddaughter. He had shared much. After an hour or so together, father and daughter left, to recover from the shock and to grieve together.

Now I will tell you something deeply personal about that episode in my life as a chaplain. I had gained this patient’s trust through love and he looked forward to our discussions both of life and of death in his last weeks. But somehow my mind had also been at work with my heart. I knew his age, the age of his son, and of his granddaughter. At some moment after his gurney left the room, while looking out the window of his room, I realized that this pattern of the family (at least with respect to age) was like mine. What flashed into my mind was this; maybe someday this too will be how the cards are played out for me in my life. The age differences of the child and grandchild with respect to the deceased were almost identical to mine, only offset by some 25 years. The emotive side of the loss of this patient led me to visit the hospital chapel. I sat by alone. I gave thanks to God through Christ Jesus that my patient’s suffering had ended, but was sad at the emotional human loss. Even for Christians of great faith, as we give thanks for our loved one now at rest in the eternal love and care of God, death stings. I prayed for the whole family and still lingered a bit caught by my calculations. At some later moment, a gentle touch on my shoulder was felt and the senior chaplain, a Roman Catholic nun whispered, “you did the math, didn’t you?” I turned and shook my head “yes.” She held me. She remained at my side in the silence of love, kindness, and understanding of grief. For at that moment, Sister Pat, was “God with me”. For me, she was the kind loving face of Christ Jesus tending to my soul.

*Let us pray,*

O Gracious God, you tell us that in Christ you are always with us, and that through Christ our sins are forgiven, and that through the resurrection You pledge to us a life hereafter. Help us O Lord to apprehend the presence of Jesus in the face of the strangers we meet in our everyday lives, on our own Road to Emmaus. We pray in the Holy Name of your Son, Christ Jesus. Amen