

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Luke 24:13-35

24:13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

24:14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

24:15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

24:16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

24:17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

24:18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

24:19 He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

24:20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

24:21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

24:22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,

24:23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

24:24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

24:25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

24:26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

24:27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

24:28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

24:29 But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

24:30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

24:31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

24:32 They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

24:33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

24:34 They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

24:35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Proclamation of the Word

"Snowman got burned. Snowman got burned."

Our toddler sized son, Avery, kept repeating this phrase for days after the incident. You see, we were visiting Chuck's parents, the Conrads, for Christmas. Grammie loves to put out all her snowmen for Christmas including a large stuffed one...by... the...fireplace. Our curious son is always one to test things. Let's push a button or light this apple on fire to see what might happen. Chuck says it's classic scientific method to test things, but it is also a kid thing. I can only imagine that two year old Avery saw that stuffed Snowman, not much smaller than he, and thought, "Let's see what happens when you touch the flames of the fire." All we heard were squeals and came running. First to grab, Avery, and then to stomp out the burning carpet in front of the hearth. Avery was traumatized and starting repeating, "Snowman got burned."

Snowman got burned, and the Conrads had to replace the carpet. On the way home to Atlanta, Avery kept repeating that phrase over and over. I am sure his little mind was having flashbacks. At bedtime we prayed to thank God that the house did not burn down, that no one was hurt...except poor snowman, we had to lay him to rest, say goodbye to snowman forever. Curiosity did not kill the cat, but snowman never recovered.

Trauma can do that to you. Catch you off guard. Send you into a tailspin of shock, flashbacks, and disbelief, then always waiting for the next shoe to fall. Whether the toddler level or adult level, trauma is real. Cleopas and friend had seen a traumatic event. Holy Saturday between the death and resurrection is where many who experience trauma live. In the aftermath of the crucifixion, the disciples lock themselves away, hide in safety, but cannot escape the fear and trauma. I imagine after Friday- of Jesus being falsely condemned, terrorized, and hung like a criminal on a cross- they were having flashbacks and images in their minds of that horror.

And so some of them get out of town- run away from the Holy City that has turned from a city of Passover celebration to a terrifying place where violence and power rule. In their deep sadness Cleopas and friend run away to Emmaus. Emmaus, a little nowhere kind of town, 7 miles away, a day's walk. But Luke wants us to know more about what Emmaus means than where it is on the map. Have you ever been to Emmaus?

We all go there sometimes... Frederick Beuchner writes that Emmaus is...

...the place that we go to in order to escape - a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, "Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway"... Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a

*second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. 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 [people] have had - ideas about love and freedom and justice - have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.*ⁱ

Cleopas and friend are getting out of town to escape the reality that what is beautiful, loving, just, and sacred is dead- killed by the greed, hate, and selfishness of both the people in power and the majority of their citizens. Not only has Jesus died, but their hope, their anchor has vanished. And now they feel they are castaways on a stormy sea without an anchor, almost ready to capsize- even though the women said that Jesus has risen that morning. But they find that very hard to believe. Surely the crooked and mean foot soldiers for the authorities just stole his body.

And then that is when it happens. A stranger comes alongside them walking on the road to Emmaus. They tell their story, and the stranger listens before saying, "You fools! Don't you believe anything the faith has taught you?" (my paraphrase) This stranger would have flunked Pastoral Care 101. No, "I feel your pain. Tell me more...", but "You fools!" The stranger is more Dr. Phil than a sweet counselor. I bet that got their attention. Sometimes we need those truth tellers who love us in our lives. Those who speak the truth in love are life's dearest friends. Then the stranger pulls out his pocket-sized Torah and reviews the whole salvation story of God's love. I wonder if they find this Bible know-it-all annoying. Regardless, they invite him in to stay for supper.

Hospitality is in the bones. Their ancestors Abraham and Sarah entertained strangers- little did they know these travelers were a delegation from God. In the book of Hebrews we remember that by showing hospitality, we entertain angels unawares sometimes. (Hebrews 13:2) Strangers and travelers can be messengers of God... or God himself.

It was at a routine meal around the table that it happened. The stranger took bread, blessed and broke it. Then he gave it to them, and their eyes were opened. They recognized the living Presence of Christ Jesus right there at the kitchen table. They remembered that this is what happened at the Passover on Thursday night. Jesus told his friends to "Do this in remembrance of me." As they remembered, they realized they were in His Presence.

Do we not long for the Presence of God most in our confusion, sorrow, and pain? Presence is more powerful than anything else. Some call it "Practicing the presence of God." Some people create special places of prayer in their home or go to special place in their mind to practice the presence of God. The good news is though, while Cleopas and friend were traveling the road home to escape the brutal reality of Jesus' death, Jesus shows up. And they know that it is He that is truly present both in

the breaking of bread and walking along the road home. They have found their true home in His presence. Christ Jesus is our true home.

One of the modern heresies we have is to believe that the presence of God is dependent upon us- our perfect prayers, our good works, our well-defined belief systems. When the truth is the opposite.

As Pastor Gary Charles of the Central church in Atlanta reflects, "It challenges the typical pious Christian comment: 'I'm on a sacred journey to find Jesus.' Emmaus is all about a God who is in a life-and-death search to find us, and often finds us on the run."ⁱⁱ

The Living Presence shows up. The lost is found.

The coin turns up after the persistent widow gets down on her hands and knees searching through dust bunnies and under every piece of furniture until the coin is found.

The sheep who gets lost one nibble at a time, is found by the smelly old Shepherd who will not give up until the one is reunited with the other 99 sheep in his fold.

The prodigal comes home out of his own desperation and need for help, but finds a loving Father foolishly running to meet him on the road home.

Cleopas and friend may have been running away, but they discover they were running toward home the whole time- home in the presence of God. We remember not the past but the Presence.

While it would make sense to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper after hearing this Scripture today, we are not. Truth be told, in good Presbyterian fashion, we have only approved the sacrament for the First Sundays of each month. Decent and in order. But that does not deny the daily ways we enjoy the holy sacrament at our common tables- in our kitchens and homes, or in the cafeteria at school, or out at a restaurant where we meet for lunch. Every time we break bread is a chance to remember the presence of God. The encouragement of a friend, or the sharing of our day, these are holy moments. These are the ways the Stranger walks alongside us listening first to us, and then offering the gift of hope or love. For even for the apostle Paul never writes about what happened to Jesus' body that day or the empty tomb. As Beuchner writes,

"But the fact of the matter is that in a way it hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing because in the last analysis what convinced the people that he had risen from the dead was not the absence of his corpse but his living presence. And so it has been ever since."ⁱⁱⁱ

While we might invoke the Name of Jesus or the Father and Holy Spirit, we are never causing the presence of God. We are merely recognizing, with eyes opened, that the living God is already present

with us. Sometimes it is a prayer, a song, a person that reminds us of the presence of God. We remember that we are in the Lord's presence.

We might recall a verse of Scripture like Psalm 51, "Cast me not away from thy presence, dear Lord, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me." Every week after the Prayer of Confession, the choir of First Presbyterian Church York, sang these words, which I know by heart because of that weekly habit of worshiping. Church was my Emmaus. I was one of those teens who went to church, even alone some Sundays, because it was the place I ran to in my own confusion, joy, sorrow, or adolescent angst. We hear these words, and we recognize the presence of God. Maybe our hearts burn within us.

I remember best the things I sing. Maybe you remember in other ways.

I imagine that night that snowman got burned that I sang to Avery as we did every night at bedtime prayers. We might have sung this song. Turn to Hymn 115....verse 3. SING TOGETHER

It may be a verse of Scripture, a song, a person that reminds us. There is power in the presence of God. When we are running away, Christ Jesus is on a life and death mission to find us. And once found; we are truly home.

The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* that captures Emmaus in a moving word of prayer. Let us pray with the confidence of little children:

"Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love."

ⁱ Frederick Beuchner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row. 1966), 85-86.

ⁱⁱ Gary W. Charles, *The E Prayer; Luke 24:13-35*, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

ⁱⁱⁱ Beuchner, *The Faces of Jesus; a Life Story* Reprint (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005)