

Luke 24:13–35

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. 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?' 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, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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 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.' 25 Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. 28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?' 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34 They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' 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.

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You might have noticed that I like to use C. S. Lewis quotes in the bulletin. As a kid I loved his Narnia series, and as a younger adult I remember when a co-worker gave me a copy of *The Screwtape Letters*, which I enjoyed a lot. I think she felt I needed a little more religion, or perhaps it was God working through her to nudge me in the direction of being a minister. Whatever the reason, I like the way that Lewis thinks.

Anyway, after his wife died, C.S. Lewis once wrote that he thought that his grief might be less if he intentionally avoided the places he and his wife Joy had frequented and so he limited his travels to only those places where they had never been together. He switched grocery stores, tried different restaurants, walked only along streets and paths that he and Joy had never taken. But it didn't work. To paraphrase Lewis, "I found out that grief is like the sky above—it is over everything." A lot of us feel that way right now in this time of pandemic. So much grief. So much grief-laden sky above. No one is spared.

The two travelers in Luke 24 seem to think that, like I hypothesized about Thomas last week, they too could walk away from their grief, and leave the bad memories of the previous Friday behind. Jerusalem had become like an empty house from which all the children had gone. It was haunted with memories. It was haunted by hope deferred. Jerusalem was the place where their dreams had died. It was more than high time to hit the road and see if they could leave their troubles behind.

The story of these two followers of Christ is interesting. They are not mentioned in any other part of the Bible. Most scholars believe that there were many more followers of Jesus than just the twelve. Many may have been following from near the beginning of his mission, and many more may have jumped on the bandwagon during his procession into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is interesting to note that only the one follower, Cleopas, is named. The other follower is not, and technically the second person does not even get identified with their sex. One theory is that this is a husband and wife who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, maybe to be with relatives, and now they were on their way back to their home. Back to safety and normality.

As Frederick Buechner asked in his classic sermon on this text, where is your “Emmaus?” We all have one. Where is it that we go to forget about all the problems and issues of life? Maybe, it’s the mall where the noise of commerce and the rush of people keep you from thinking about life. Maybe it’s a bar where the booze and the beer nuts help numb you to the more bitter truths that swirl outside the windows. Maybe it’s working in the field or workshop, just focusing on the repetition of the work, or the task at hand, or putting fishing line into a river or lake. Maybe it’s the TV remote that takes you away from it all as you mindlessly channel surf every single evening. We try to escape our troubles. That’s when we head to Emmaus. That’s how we hope to escape our grief and troubles. Of course, it doesn’t work now, and it did not work very well then either. Grief is like the sky ...

The two followers of Jesus thought getting back to Emmaus maybe would help them forget everything, but as they trekked that way their conversation kept circling back and back and back again to the death of the One they had loved, the One in whom they had hoped. Had hoped; what a depressing term.

In fact, they were talking about all that—failing singularly to forget their troubles, in other words—when the clueless stranger came up to them. “Shalom! What’s up, friends?” The question catches them up short. After all, doesn’t everybody know the latest?! “Where have you been, friend” they ask. “You must be the only one in the whole county who hasn’t heard about the recent disaster!”

It is probably a sign of the enormity of their grief that they reacted like that. In truth, there could have been lots of people who hadn’t heard about it. Sure, to the disciples this was headline news, but to some people it may have been noted only in passing. Just another Roman crucifixion. Happens all the time. It was just a side story buried on page 3 of the “Jerusalem Gazette.” Big deal. Pass the Sports section. Seriously, think about how much news you watch on Christmas, or the fourth of July. Maybe it’s different for you, but I tend to not watch the news during a holiday. I’m spending time with and focusing on family and friends, and contrary to how we look at these events now, Jesus’s death would not have been “front page news,” especially during the Passover celebration.

Well, this stranger on the road must have been one such clueless tourist because he didn’t seem to know a blessed thing about any of it. So, they explain things to the stranger, more or less admitting in the end that the One on whom they had pinned their hopes did not pan out. They had made, it appeared, a rather large mistake.

We all make mistakes, of course, and when the mistake in question is no more significant than burning my breakfast toast or accidentally calling “Kathryn” “Morgan,” I can pick myself up and move on. But when the mistake you’ve made is more along the lines of trusting a friend who ended up stealing from you, or trusting your partner, only to find they’ve been a serial adulterer for decades, well, then you feel not just embarrassed or a bit upset over your mistake, but shattered by it. “How could I have gotten things that wrong?” we want to ask ourselves.

But then, suddenly, the stranger, who had appeared so clueless a moment before, changes. He has the audacity first of all to call these two folks foolish, and before they can object to this, the stranger has launched into a quite serious and thorough Bible study. And after that, the rest of the trek to Emmaus just flew by! With breathtaking sweep and exegetical precision, this anonymous fellow traveler re-tells Scripture’s story. It is Israel’s story, all right, but the stranger tells it in a new way. The last time they’d heard anyone talk about the Bible in such an invigorating a fashion was . . . well, never mind.

Before they knew it, they were standing at their home. With a slight wave and a nod, the stranger says, “Nice talking with you” and then keeps walking. So, Cleopas pipes up, “Sir! Look, the sun is setting which means the thieves along the highway will be coming out soon. It’s not safe to travel alone—stay with us at least tonight.” The man agrees.

After having washed the dust of the journey off faces, hands, and feet, the three of them sit down to eat. Before they knew what’s happening, the stranger reaches for the flat bread, lifting it up in a strikingly familiar way. He then gives thanks, breaks it just so, and hands it to Cleopas and his wife. They knew instantly who he was but just as they are ready to cry out, “Jesus!” he was gone.

The situation of a sudden realization/recognition of someone is not something unique to the Bible. In the ancient Greek myth called *The Odyssey*, we read the epic tale of Odysseus. Odysseus was the valiant warrior who fought so bravely in the Trojan War. But, according to legend, his homeward journey after that war was interrupted for many years as the gods had decided to test Odysseus’ true mettle through a series of trials. His journeys carried him far and wide as he encountered mythic beasts and lands, many of which have passed into common parlance: the Cyclops, the Procrustean bed, Scylla and Charybdis, the sirens’ voices.

Meanwhile, back at his home, Odysseus’ wife and family presume he must have died en route back from Troy. Finally, however, the day came when the gods released Odysseus and he arrives back home at last. But instead of simply waltzing through the front door and crying out some Greek equivalent of, “Honey, I’m home!” Odysseus decides that he wants to determine if anything has changed during his long absence. Did his wife still love him? Had she been faithful? In order to find out, Odysseus disguises himself, approaching his home looking like a stranger in need of temporary lodging.

The housekeeper welcomes the apparent traveler and performs for him the then-standard practice of foot-washing. As she does so, she regales the stranger with anecdotes about her long-lost master, Odysseus, whom she had also served as a nurse when he was young. She told the traveler about how long her master has been missing and she noted, too, that by then Odysseus would be about the same age and of about the same build as the man whose feet she was washing. Now when Odysseus had been a young boy, he was once gored by a wild boar, leaving a nasty scar on his leg. As she went about her servile task, suddenly her hand brushed against that old scar and instantly her eyes were opened and she recognized, with great joy, her beloved friend and master!

Recognition scenes like that have long exercised a strong pull on the human heart. Sometimes this can be used for comedic effect, as in any number of episodes on the old I Love Lucy show when Lucy would disguise herself so as to worm her way into one of her husband's shows. And you always waited eagerly for that moment when Desi Arnaz's eyes would widen right before he'd exclaim, "Luuucccy!" But such shocks of recognition are also the stuff of high drama, as in The Odyssey and any number of plays, novels, and films across the centuries. And, of course, also in Luke 24.

"I knew it!" Cleopas exclaims. "Didn't you wonder about this, too! The way he taught us, the way he applied scripture, wasn't it eerily familiar all along!" Then, stuffing the bread into their pockets, they sprint back to Jerusalem, covering those seven miles in record time. A little of their thunder is stolen, however, in that before they can spill the beans of their news, the others say, "The Lord appeared to Simon Peter!" They then share the news of their encounter, making special note of the fact that Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Grief is like the sky. It's over everything. But so now, apparently, is hope. Hope is something we need to nurture and treasure right now. The good news is that the Good News is exactly that. Hope for all of us. Amen