

Let's Go to Church

sermon digest

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Luke 24:28-35

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Have you been to Emmaus? No one knows the exact location. Luke places it about seven miles from Jerusalem, an easy walk from the center of the crisis on Friday, yet, a safe distance from the scene of the crime.

Sometimes you just have to get away; you have to get out of the center of conflict, leave the darkness of your fear or the heavy burden of your grief. For the most part, the Gospels stay close to the center of the Passion narrative providing cameos of the various witnesses to the events that began with the meal with disciples on Thursday evening, probably the Passover Seder, passing through the arrest trial and crucifixion with differing viewpoints that come together in a common sense of defeat, and culminating in the reports of an empty tomb where the body was placed and eye-witness reports of encounters with the living Christ. Four accounts of the Lord's Supper (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians) provide a unanimous account of the symbols of bread and wine. The verbs tend to be the same whenever Jesus is host at the table with his disciples: he *took* the bread, *blessed* the bread, *broke* the bread, and *gave* the bread to his disciples. And the symbol is the same, "This is my body"—Luke adds, "which is given for you." For early Christians the symbols connect in three directions, past, present and future: The bread, his body, recalls (1) Christ's suffering and death on the cross, (2) the gathering of the church around the Eucharistic table, and (3) the final gathering in the Kingdom of God. Even the miracle feeding of the multitude in the ministry of Jesus recalls the table where Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread.

Emmaus is an escape from the crisis of the moment. The story is found only in Luke. Even in Luke's story, Emmaus may be more about the symbol than the place. Emmaus is where profoundly disturbed people can escape to think it through and recover some sense of balance and peace for their lives.

Right out of seminary we were in the middle of the turbulent era of racial integration, the Vietnam War, the emerging demand for human rights for just about everyone, the revolutionary invasion of the drug culture, the hippies, the war of the generations, and the Supreme Court decision on abortion rights *Roe v. Wade*. (The list could go on.) The revolutionary war between parents and teens in our community found its way into the church. Parents and teens were battling over superficial issues like wearing apparel, facial hair, the appropriate length of male haircuts, and much more essential issues like war and peace, smoking and drugs, a revolution in sexual promiscuity associated with the "pill," etc. All questions centered in a discussion of church leadership about the appropriate response of our church to the issues of the day. In other words, do we bring all of this stuff into the holy sanctuary of worship, or leave it at the door? I was one step out of a seminary culture that insisted on a relevant faith. Around the tables in graduate seminars, I disagreed and debated issues with my friends without shedding any blood and naively thought that we could do the same at church. With all of my differences with friends in seminary, we were agreed that the church could not hide in history somewhere avoiding the screaming questions that were ripping apart families and tearing the fabric of society. The war visible on the evening news spilled over into the streets of the cities, and I did not think that we could ignore the fires burning all around us. After a discussion of the deacons about possibly toning down the rhetoric in church, which being interpreted meant "the pulpit," my dear friend and neighbor, whom I dearly loved, spoke to me in private. Jack said, "I have constant stress on the job, jockeying for position with my peers and trying to keep up with my field. When I come home, Trudy and I have to deal with school problems, marriage spats, and parenting issues and disagreements with our boys. I come to church to find peace, not more issues and arguments to be resolved."

Frederick Buechner (*The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 85) viewed Emmaus as a retreat: "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 men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life." Buechner caught on to the symbolism: Emmaus can be anything we do to get away; it may even mean going to church.

I really can't fault Jack for his desire to get out of the pressure cooker or for the two disciples to retreat from crucifixion or anyone else who needs to find a quiet place to pray and think it through to some level of resolution. In spite of my driven need to maintain the bridge between the church and the world, I am not immune to the necessity of periodic escape. Some thirty-five years after my conversation with Jack, I have learned a few things, like the only conclusions that count are the ones we reach through our own journey of faith. I must interpret the gospel out of my own struggle with meaning, but I cannot make the journey for you, and I cannot do your thinking or concluding for you. I would only post a warning for all who seek escape to Emmaus: look out for the confrontation with the living presence of God even in the hiding places of life.

Emmaus is the place of encounter with the living Christ. Luke is a master of drama and irony. The disciples take leave of the terror in Jerusalem and run smack-dab into the living Christ. The mystery of the resurrection is retained incognito in the presence of Jesus. He is called a “stranger,” actually an alien, one whose connection to the disciples and to the events they are discussing is pure irrelevance. How could this outsider know anything? The irritation of the disciples sounds a familiar quip, “If you need to ask, you can’t afford it,” or in this case, “If you need to ask, you are irrelevant.” But, to their surprise, he knows something about the teachings of the prophets, the necessity of suffering for the Messiah of God, in fact, the connection of suffering to anything we ever do that has meaning. The disciples are hooked, caught up in the conversation with the stranger and hungering for more when the stranger appears to be going on down the road. Now, don’t ignore the symbolism here. Jesus is already moving on from the events of Friday, moving toward the future, the place where the church will have to deal with the tragedy of the cross of Jesus along with the cross of every child of God with a new level of understanding. They ask him to stay. They want to cling to the moment, like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, to set up an altar and live there forever and ever. When they sit at the table, the guest becomes the host and speaks words that echo through the halls of time whenever the church gathers at the table of the Lord. He *took* the bread, *blessed* the bread, *broke* the bread, and *gave* the bread to his disciples. All in one sentence, their eyes were opened, they recognized the living Christ, and he vanished from their sight. They reflected on the warm experience of his presence at the table, learned of his resurrection from other disciples, and offered their witness, “how he had been made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

Carlyle Marney has this great story in a Maundy Thursday meditation in *The Crucible of Redemption*:

A friend of mine tells me that the archaeologist Romanoff uncovered what, to him, was indisputable evidence that behind the rubbish of the third wall the Lord's own grave had been found, but that he had been persuaded not to publish for the sake of the people it would harm! I said, "Rubbish! Let him publish! Let him publish all he knows! It couldn't hurt. For this is not where he said he would meet us. Not under any wall. . . . He said he would meet us at neither cross nor grave; he said he would meet us at his table."

Emmaus is where the church lives and has lived through the ages. It is the place or time or cause that brings us together, sometimes in a common experience of crisis, to discover anew the real presence of Christ with his people at the table. Although they are warmed by the discussion, the disciples do not see him in the scriptures. Christ is revealed in the breaking of bread.