

“The Road to Emmaus”

Psalms 116; Luke 24:13-35

April 23, 2023

Many years ago before I was a pastor, I worked as a radio salesperson. Not that I sold radios, rather I sold advertising on a radio station. It was a pretty good job for the most part as I got access to concert and movie tickets as well as loads of free music. Like I said, it was a good job, but it was a job nevertheless. And what do they want salespeople doing, after all? Selling, of course. But, early on, things were difficult. You see, we couldn't point advertisers towards any ratings, they were essentially flying blind when purchasing time on our station. That made them very reluctant to buy. So, here we were, the hottest radio station in Charlotte but we had very few advertisers save some bars and automobile dealers. That's not enough to run a station on, we needed more advertisers. So, an idea was hatched – a sales contest. And it wasn't just an individual sales contest, it was a group contest. If we could all get to a certain dollar amount, then we'd all be given hefty bonuses. Sounds like a good deal, right? And it was. But things were still a grind. Every morning we'd have a sales meeting where we'd tally what we'd sold together. On days where we were making good progress it was interesting to note the good feelings and cooperation of the entire group. On other days, when little or no progress was being made, we were quick to bicker and blame each other for not working hard enough.

I read a story this week about something similar, only it was with mountain climbers. On days where they could see the peak, energy was high and teamwork was prevalent. On days where the peak was obscured by clouds, however, the mood was quite different. It just goes to show that, when you can see the goal coming into focus, things become easier. The load becomes lighter. Light at the end of the tunnel always lifts spirits, doesn't it?

But that's not where we initially encounter these two travelers in this morning's Gospel reading, is it? At the moment, there is no light at the end of their tunnel, at least not any that they were yet aware of. No, you can just feel from the conversation how downtrodden these two men were. And it all makes sense – in a number of days, they'd seen their hopes for a bright future quashed on a Roman cross. And it makes sense, after all. We don't know tons about these men but we do know they were disciples of Jesus Christ that had been with Him until the end. That meant that they would've seen amazing things as Jesus' earthly ministry unfolded. They'd have seen water turned into wine, a few loaves of bread multiplied to feed 5000 people. They would've seen Lazarus emerge from his tomb. They would've seen amazing things and it would've changed the course of their lives.

But now, everything had changed again, only this time for the worse. Perhaps these two men were there when Jesus was arrested. Given they know about what happened afterwards, it's altogether likely that they watched as He was beaten, scourged, mocked and crucified, a spear poked into His side. Perhaps these men were even there as Jesus uttered the words, *“It is finished,”* and then died. Regardless of what they'd actually seen, what they knew was depressing enough. The hope that they'd had fostered throughout this season had disappeared. They were now like all of the disciples and apostles – wondering how to make meaning now that their leader was gone.

It's a depressing time when hope disappears. When progress isn't made toward reaching a goal, when you can't see the peak from the earlier example. It's easy to become depressed, hopeless and feel life slowly ebb away. Have any of you experienced hopelessness? I have, at points in my younger life, and it is no fun, believe me. Hopelessness has a way of swallowing you up like a wet blanket, putting a literal damper on anything good that may come into your life. We feel that hopelessness on these two men as they walk, but it wasn't to be the case that hopelessness was going to be their way from now on from the Lord our God had ordained something else for them. An encounter. But not just like running into a buddy at the Harris-Teeter, no I mean something far more profound happened on the Road to Emmaus. An encounter with Jesus, the newly Risen Lord of all. This is the type of meeting which alters the course of a person's life. We know it did for these two. Can't you just imagine their fervor at spreading the news about Jesus after having encountered Him on the road to Emmaus?

Speaking of, Emmaus is about seven miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem. There's no given reason given why these travelers are on this particular journey but I think, given their conversation, they were returning home

after having followed Jesus to His unfortunate demise. It makes sense, after all. Now that Jesus was gone, it was only right to return to kith and kin. The words would be hard to swallow but you'd have to admit you were wrong. Wrong to have gone off and followed this Prophet and Healer. Now, with Jesus dead and buried, there is only the routine and ordinary life to return to. But, you see, we know something, don't we? Jesus, He isn't really dead. He is alive, risen.

And let's just hold it right there for a second. I am glad I worship a living God. I can't imagine quite how depressing it would be to wake up and surrender my life to an idol made of wood or steel or gold. How depressing would it be to pray to something you knew was dead? No, Jesus Christ is alive even now and is with us by the power of the Holy Spirit. How do I know? Well, I feel His presence and I hope you do as well. But more importantly, I know the Word on the subject. Matthew's Gospel tells us that whenever two or three or more are gathered in the name of Jesus, He is there with them in the power of the Holy Spirit. To be joined by Jesus is the best feeling in the world. These two disciples would've gotten a taste of that as they walked and talked. Jesus was literally with them, although they didn't recognize Him at first.

Why is that, I wonder? Why didn't they recognize Him at first? I think it is there to dynamically point out that it takes an encounter with Jesus to truly open our eyes to the truth. Remember with Mary how she didn't recognize Jesus until He called her name. Mary, He says, and only then does Mary recognize that she'd standing in the presence of her beloved friend, teacher and Lord. Here, likewise, these two remain oblivious until Jesus takes the initiative. It makes an important point. *Jesus takes the initiative*. It only makes sense. Spiritually, let's face it, we're pretty blind without Jesus' light. That's why one of the more common images used for us in the Scriptures is sheep. We're sheep of Jesus flock, that's what we're told. And if you know much about sheep, you recognize that they're not terribly smart. As a matter of a fact, sheep slaughterhouses use something known as a Judas goat in order to get the sheep to the killing floor. You see, sheep are just followers, so they train a goat to lead the sheep to the slaughterhouse. Sheep are so helpless that when something leads them, even to their demise, they follow.

So too it is with us. We don't set out to stray from God but it just happens. We're like sheep, after all, following the herd and, oftentimes, the herd is being led by a Judas Goat. Soon, however, we find ourselves lost and alone. That's why we're so thankful to know about the goodness of our Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us that He'll leave the flock to go and find the one that was lost. And when He finds that lost one, He slings him over His shoulders and hand-carries him back to the safety of the flock. Jesus is the one that rescues us. Jesus is the one that opens our eyes to His presence and grace. That's good news for us. The Bible teaches us that "*While we were yet sinners, Christ, died for us.*" That's in Romans, by the way. In Romans, we learn so much about the salvation that Jesus Christ enacted for us. And what Romans does not say, nor does any other part of the Scriptures indicate, that we take initiative when it comes to our relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul teaches us in Romans that every time we cry out to the Father, it is actually the Holy Spirit in us doing so. And, better still, what this passage from the Gospel of Luke points us to is that Jesus meets us right where we are at. Man, is that good news. It's good news because it means that we don't need to somehow "Get ready" for Jesus to come into our lives.

Sometimes we think that we've got to get our house in order before we invite Jesus Christ into our lives. I always think about it like from an unclean house perspective. How excited are you to hear the doorbell ring when you know your house is a mess? Just the other day, the doorbell rang at our house and I realized we had like a month's worth of amazon boxes in our foyer. As soon as I heard the doorbell ring, I thought, maybe if I don't make any noise they'll go away. No, we don't like houseguests when our homes are dirty. But we may get to thinking that one day, we're going to clean up our lives, get rid of the things we know we shouldn't be doing, do those things we know that we should. You know, we're going to get right with God.

But the thing is, we're never going to get right with God on our own. That's why on Easter Sunday, Freddie talked about the two types of world religions. Either you've got a religion of human accomplishment or you've got a religion of God's accomplishment. Other religions rely on what you're doing for God to secure your salvation. Christianity, on the other hand, boasts about what God has done for us.

I'll never forget being a younger man, although it is getting harder as the years keep rolling by I had kind of fallen into that trap. My life was a mess, I knew that. Heck, everybody who knew me knew that my life was a

mess. But I kept thinking, I'm just going to turn this around and get right with God. But you know what? Things just kept getting worse. One day, my mom called and asked if I wanted to go to church. It wasn't the first time she'd done so. You know how parents are, they always want the best for their child. And my mom knew my life wasn't where I wanted it to be. So, she invited me to church...repeatedly. I, on the other hand, kept repeatedly turning her down. I just wasn't ready to go to church, I thought. I had a lot to get in order before I showed up at the House of the Lord, so I thought. But one day, that invitation came and I just didn't have any strength left to fight it. I just went along with it. I figured at the very least, it would stop my mom from inviting me. If I just go once, I thought, I can get my mom off my back. Now given the fact that I'm the one preaching right now, I think it's probably safe to say that this story has a turn in it. What can I say? It took. That one time at church was amazing. Jesus opened my eyes in a way that I hope I'll ever forget. And it didn't happen, believe me, because my life was in order. No, far from it. As I said, my life at the time was an absolute wreck. But when the time was right, Jesus met me right where I was at and the rest is, as they say, history.

And believe me when I tell you, I am not the only one something like that has happened to. One of the things that really astounded me when I first started going to Kairos was seeing a similarity in all of us who volunteer. Just about to a man, we've all suffered with something pretty significant. Many of us have contemplated suicide and other drastic measures in order to alleviate our pain and frustration. But all of us have a similar story. Of being at a particularly low point in our lives when there was some marvelous experience of faith just happened. For me, it was going to church that one time but for others, the event is different. Yet each of us has had the experience of having our eyes opened to the truth of Jesus Christ. And that's because Jesus meets us where we're at. We don't need to get gussied up to find The Lord. He will find us, no matter what.

One great example of that comes to us from the book of Jonah. There, the prophet Jonah is given some specific instructions by God. But, you see, Jonah for reasons of his own, doesn't want to do that. So, he runs. Gets on a boat going in the exact opposite direction of where the Lord is calling him to. Does it work? Not so much. Jonah is found by the Lord and soon got some rather squishy accommodations for his trip to the very place he was trying to avoid.

Yes, Jesus finds us, even if we're trying to hide from Him. God's will, not ours, be done. And the next thing that happens, is that Jesus opens our eyes to His Word. This is another important part of our new birth, the revelation of Scripture. Here, Jesus talks to these two men, explaining to them what was meant by Scripture. In order to show them exactly who He is and why He was sent, Jesus turns to the words of the Bible in order to show them. I wonder where He began. My guess is He began in Genesis, showing them that soon after the serpent seduced Adam and Eve, a prophecy was given. That one day, the Son of man would strike the heel of the tempter, destroying him. Known as the protoevangelium, this is the earliest reference to Christ's atoning work. But there would've been plenty to show. In total the Old Testament has something on the order of 324 prophecies about Jesus. Prophecies from the Old Testament that were fulfilled by Jesus Christ. That is to say that it could've been a long conversation Jesus had with the men as there was ample material to pull from.

Have you ever pulled on a locked door? You know what I mean, you're leaving a place and you miss the sign and pull on the wrong door. It's no fun. Why is it always after doing that the sign becomes so clear? Well, sometimes I'm afraid Christianity feels a lot like that. We want in but there seems to be a locked door. We don't really get what the religion is about. And that's fundamentally because we don't quite know what the religion is about. Not many of us read the Scriptures and that's to our and to our society's great detriment.

But when Jesus comes that front door of Scripture becomes the correct door and the next thing you know, you're on the other side of it. Why? Because when Jesus comes, He brings with Him an understanding of the Word. And as it comes, you just can't get enough of it.

I read a great Facebook post the other day from a friend of mine that I haven't seen in a couple of years. They've been difficult years for her. An addict, she hit bottom in 2019, just as COVID was getting ramped up. At that point, her addiction brought her to the ends of her wits and her means. She lost everything...I mean everything. And did I mention she was pregnant, to boot. It was in that despair, that mess that Jesus encountered her. Leaving the hospital with a cache of diapers and wipes she couldn't afford on her own, she made her way to a rescue center that worked with young women. Only then, just as she was getting situated,

COVID shut the world down. She was left in a tiny apartment with an infant. She had only one book, a KJV someone had loaned her. My friend reported she made a prayer closet and began studying Gods Word. They were lean times but she made it through them feeling even stronger than she had ever before. Knowing the Lord's Word is just like that. It centers us, stabilizes us. Now, just two years later, my friend is fully back on her feet again. As a matter of a fact, just a couple of posts before the one I saw yesterday, Tracy was able to buy a house there in the Pittsburgh area she lives in now. Yes, Tracy has been turned around by a God that has a habit of doing just that.

Jesus meets these travelers on the Road to Emmaus. He meets them right where they're at and He does so by using Scripture as the means to explain that salvation of His people was God's plan from the very beginning.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.