



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Mission Road

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 24:13-35

April 23, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Darren Kennedy

Good Morning, Village Church. It is an absolute pleasure to be with you today. So before I start sermonizing, I specifically want to say thank you to Rodger and Tom for inviting me to be a part of the celebration of Village Church's 75 years. It's a delight and an honor to be a part of the tradition and a part of what God has been doing in and through this church over time. Village Church has always been a missionary church, and so it's no surprise that my own journey to becoming a missionary in Egypt started here on Mission Road. I actually remember the first time that I spoke in front of a congregation. It was right here in this lectern. I was in sixth grade and they had a little wooden box that you could stand on. I could just peek over. I remember reading a passage from the Old Testament boldly mispronouncing all of the names.

But the thing that was most special for me that day, or on that occasion, happened two days later. I received a piece of mail, which was a very rare thing. I opened it up to find a note from Dr. Bob scrolled in green Sharpie on the bulletin from that day, thanking me for involvement in the service. The rest of the day, and maybe the rest of the week, it was not difficult to be of good cheer.

I'm currently a professor and the academic dean at the largest and oldest Protestant seminary in the Middle East. We have 620 students and Village has supported us and our ministry there for the last 24 years. We have the privilege of training dynamic leaders for the Arab world who will be ministers, lay leaders, peacemakers, addiction counselors, media workers and teachers, all aiming to reflect the love of God in Jesus Christ to those around them. I want you to hear me say thank you. Thank you for the ways that you've walked with us—that you've supported us. Thank you especially for praying for us on those days when you see the bad headlines in our part of

the world. It means the world to us to be in partnership with you in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So our passage today actually takes place on the very first Easter Sunday. While there have been reports about Jesus' resurrection, uncertainty and doubt remain. We find two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. They're not part of the 12, but they would've been part of the larger group of people following Jesus, listening to his teaching, seeing his acts and deeds of power. While we know that one of them is named Cleopas, we know nothing about the identity of the other one. This is a famous scene that people like to paint. So Renaissance painters and all throughout history, images of this scene have been painted and the overwhelming majority assume that it is two males who are walking along.

I want to challenge that because they end up coming to a home that's in common. So I think it's at least possible that it's a man and his wife walking along that road together. In the gospel of John, we hear mention of a man named Clopas and his wife, Mary. Mary, the wife of Clopas, was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. So it's possible that this is simply a different spelling, and who we have is Cleopas with his wife, Mary, walking that road to a Emmaus that day. We don't know for certain, but it's possible. They were almost certainly in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast and they were on their journey home. Emmaus is about seven miles from Jerusalem and it's a hilly course. Seven miles—if you want to conceptualize it—is about the distance from here to just beyond Union Station downtown.

Regardless, they're ordinary people involved in an extraordinary story. They're devastated with sadness and disappointment. They're confused and unsure of what to believe, but they had a lot to talk about and process together. Now, I don't know for sure and none of you laughed at it, but I tend to think that

Luke was actually smiling when he wrote this narrative because you have an unrecognizable Jesus who comes up to people who are deep in conversation and says, “What are you talking about?” He’s that guy on the airplane that you do not want to be sitting next to on the Trans-Atlantic flight. But Cleopas responds and, and again, I can’t say for sure because it’s not written in the scripture, but I tend to think there might have been a little bit of exacerbation in his voice, because he says this, and I quote, “Are you the only stranger in all of Jerusalem who does not know what has been happening in these days?”

The beauty of it is: He’s literally the only stranger in all of Jerusalem who *does* know what has been happening in these days! And again, you get this great laugh line from Jesus, “What things?” He’s gone through holy week and says, “What things?”

This is a pivotal point in the story. Do Cleopas and his partner brush off the stranger and ask him to mind his own business? Or do they take the opportunity that’s in front of them? Remember that in one week, they had lost the one who they believed would redeem Israel. He had been betrayed, tortured, humiliated, and executed on a cross. They were devastated. Nevertheless, they tell the stranger all they know and they include their own doubts and questions. They opened their hearts to another person and they risked vulnerability. It was precisely this openness that opened the way for Jesus to connect the dots for them on the journey forward into Emmaus.

The next pivotal point in the story comes when they get to Emmaus and scripture tells us that Jesus accelerated. He starts walking faster as night begins to set in. But the two decide that they need to put the safety of this stranger first. Travel could be dangerous alone at night in the first century. So they opened their home to the stranger. It wasn’t a sort of anemic, non-invitation, “Come on in, it’d be great.” No, it was a strong urging to come inside.

Now, there’s all sorts of ways that this could have gone wrong. We read about it in headlines all the time, but they acted with compassion and they took the opportunity to welcome a stranger in need. The New Testament is filled with different examples of people who invite Jesus to their house.

Jairus asked him to come over when his daughter is sick and needs healing. We see Mary and Martha

invite Jesus into their home; they want to hear his teaching. The Pharisees invite him because he’s a popular and influential figure. But the really astonishing thing about our narrative today is that they did not invite Jesus into their home. They invited a stranger into their home. This is a literal playing out of what we see in Matthew 25 where we’re told whenever we do it to the least of these, we do it to Christ. Quote: “They saw him a stranger and invited him in.” Then something amazing happens. They start into the meal and their eyes are opened. They realize that this stranger, Jesus, did indeed know what had been happening in Jerusalem over these last days.

They realized that Jesus was alive, that Jesus had defeated death and deserved their faith. All this happened because they opened their hearts to a stranger. The whole experience was transformative and they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem to tell the others. Now I’m a distance runner. I used to run in a track and cross country for Shawnee Mission East and I love imagining that this might have been this husband and wife’s first 14-mile day.

I want to suggest to you that this story is a story of ordinary people taking opportunities that are in front of them to reflect the love of God to others. On their Mission Road, on the way to Emmaus, they showed kindness, openness, love and hospitality to someone who needed it. They weren’t superheroes. They weren’t geniuses. They weren’t people of unlimited patience. Nevertheless, they acted as followers of Christ. When opportunity arose, based on their own encounters and experience of Jesus previously, they reflected grace to another in the contours of their own experience.

Part of why I love this story so much is that it reminds me of how I experience Village Church. Like the two disciples, you try to open your hearts to the community and to the world around you. In response to God’s love, like these two disciples, you are working hard to shine the light and hope of Christ to the world around you.

I had the chance to work at Village right out of college and I worked with Andy Wilson, Vic Hammond and Lori Eberhardy in the Youth department. But I’ve always been struck with the incredible, myriad of ways that Village served in a missional capacity inside and outside the church. Sometimes

our opportunities are easy and they're even natural expressions of doing what we love to do most. I had this great gig as a youth leader. I loved working with high-school students. I was taking Village kids canoeing in Minnesota, backpacking in Yellowstone, or serving on mission trips in the Dominican Republic and Los Angeles. All of those things were me getting to do my very favorite things with my very favorite people. I had the chance of doing them with Zach Walker and Will Breytspraak; what could be better? God gives us all predilections, gifts and talents that help us reflect Christ's love to the world around us. Use those opportunities, be light and salt, using your passions for others. But at other times, the opportunities we face are truly hard and risky. Like those travelers on the road to Emmaus, we have to decide: How do we reflect grace here and now? And do we trust God enough to try to do so?

One of the most influential people in my Christian walk was a youth intern here at Village Presbyterian Church named Paul Childs. Paul was social, funny, athletic and mischievous—that's what made him such a great junior-high leader for boys.

He had a Bible that he kept by his bedside. I thought that was great. You know, wow, this is incredible devotion. What a wonderful Christian. It was one of the black Bibles that they give away in sixth grade. They used to do this in Carol Cowden and Judy Cooper's day. I opened it up one time and instead of saying, "This Bible is presented to Paul Childs from Village Church," it was crossed out and edited to read, "This Bible stolen from Village Church by Paul Childs." He at least had the decency to date it.

Paul loved people and reflected that love of Christ to me as a teenager. Paul was also a competitive triathlete and a very good one. And on Sept. 7, 1986, Paul was so far ahead at the bike stage of the triathlon that the police officer waved a truck across the

course. Paul came over the crest, struck the truck and died instantly. It was a tragic accident with terrible consequences. And 35 years later, I still carry Paul's picture in my wallet.

Paul's parents were members of Village Church and they did something astonishing in spite of their grief and brokenness. They knew that the accident was a mistake. It was utterly void of malice and they also knew that there was a real chance that that guilt would destroy the people who were involved. It was unbearable to them to think that Paul's life could have been lived so fully for grace, only to torment others in death. So they called the youth pastor at the time, Mike Vaughn, and they said, "Would you please invite the police officer, the truck driver and the two race volunteers to come over to our home for tea and lemon bars?" They came over and they cried together. They spoke of Paul, they spoke of forgiveness and they spoke of hope. Paul's death could have led to bitterness and overwhelming guilt, but faith opened the way for hope. Hope of the resurrection, hope of forgiveness, hope that Christ is with us and can change reality.

No matter how awful the circumstances could be in this 75th year of Village Church, I hope that we can look back and celebrate all that God has done in our time together. But I hope that we'll do it with an understanding that we want to go forward with that tradition, not with the hope of being the greatest 1950s church of the 21st century, but rather to go forward with faithfulness, taking the opportunities that we find in our lives and in the diversity of work and ministry. Some of them will be natural, joyful expressions of your passions and deepest skills. But like Paul's parents, some of the opportunities will be awful and hard. Remember that Christ meets us there in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring transformation and a better tomorrow.