



Reservation at Sunset

TEXT
Luke 24:13–35

August 14, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Len Carrell

It says there were “two of them.” That’s how Luke describes it: There were “two of them” walking along this road, leaving Jerusalem, heading towards a nearby village. There were “two of them.” Because that’s how Jesus liked to call his disciples; he liked to call them in twos. So it’s no surprise that there were “two of them.”

It was the evening on that same Easter day, and these two men were walking and talking and sharing their stories. Then something happened. Do you remember? Did you hear it? It says Jesus came near to them and went with them. This is the first post-resurrection appearance story in Luke’s gospel, and he appears to the “two of them.” And he does something else: He asks them a question. “What are you talking about?” he says, “What are these words you are sharing?” And do you know what they do? They stop. They stop dead in their tracks. Luke says they look sad, downcast and gloomy.

The reality of grief and loss has taken its toll on them. It can do that to a person. It can give us pause. It can leave us motionless. He says, “What are you talking about?” They stop, and they look at him and say,

“Really? Really! Are you the only person who doesn’t know what has happened in Jerusalem these last few days? Everybody here knows what has happened in Jerusalem. You don’t know? You don’t know what has happened? Are you kidding me? Are you the only stranger who doesn’t know, really?” He simply asks them a question, and they stop; and out of their grief, they scoff at him.

I have often heard this story called “The Road to Emmaus.” But I like what the story is actually called so much better. It’s called “The Walk to Emmaus.” I love that! Of course it’s called “the walk,” not “the road.” I mean, who cares about the road anyway? What’s so important about a road? Everyone knows the road is messy. Everyone knows the road is dirty and rocky and a terrible terrain. It’s not about the road. The road is not important. It’s about the walk we make on the road — that’s what’s so important. Because who in this room doesn’t understand our faith to be “a walk”?

We walk by faith and not by sight;

With gracious words draw near;

O Christ, who spoke as none e’er spoke:

“My peace be with you here.”

It’s about the walk — a wild and mysterious and wondrous walk. And sometimes we stumble, and sometimes we fall, and sometimes we have no idea where we’re going. Sometimes we stop dead in our tracks. We become motionless, we stop believing, we become scornful. “Really? Are you the only one who doesn’t know?”

But the point is, we’re supposed to walk, nonetheless, but we never walk alone. There were “two of them.” It does make me ask the question: Where on earth are they going? Oh sure, Luke tells us it’s a place named Emmaus, but today it’s pretty hard to pinpoint exactly where that is. So no one really knows. At best, we believe it’s somewhere west of Jerusalem. Seven miles, that’s what we’re told.

Based on the story, we do know it must have been close enough for the “two of them” to make the journey as evening fell and the sun was setting. Perhaps that is why their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Maybe it was the glare of the western sun that got in their eyes as it was setting in the distance. Or maybe, as it is often reported in these resurrection stories, Luke intended for Jesus to appear to them as a stranger.

We also know that these two men were not of the original twelve disciples. Luke makes that very clear. He says the two men “returned to Jerusalem and found the eleven and their companions . . . and shared what had happened to them on the road.” So I ask you again, “Where are they going?” Everyone else is back in Jerusalem. Isn’t that where they’re supposed to be — with the beloved community? So why are they leaving? Were they headed home? Emmaus — be it a fictional place or a real one — seems to be a place that is nowhere in particular.

Frederick Buechner says Emmaus is “the place we go in order to escape.” I’m sure many of you have places like that too. I know I do. For example, your local Starbucks — and I know many of you escape to Starbucks because, let’s be honest, who can find a seat at the Starbucks? Jesus is going to return one day, thanks be to God, and apparently his first stop is going to be a Starbucks — because everyone in the world is waiting for something there, and it can’t be a latte.

Or maybe your passion is gardening, or you find peace in mowing the lawn (I don’t know who you are, but I’m glad God created that for you.) For some, it’s playing golf, or a good dose of retail therapy, or watching the big game with friends. For others, it’s curling up with a good book, or crafting, or finishing that project in the basement you started two summers ago.

There is a sweet escape of peace and tranquility awaiting us all, my friends. I know it’s out there. And I know we all have

one. We all have a place we retreat to — a place that is nothing but rainbows and unicorns and fuzzy bunnies. It is our own little happy place. Buechner says, “Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred.”

So why is this so important? We all have our roads to Emmaus. And sometimes we need to take a long walk on them, to become lost in our thoughts. And God knows that it’s not as if these places aren’t healthy at times, because they are. It’s just that if we think of them as being intended for only us . . . if we retreat to them too often and too casually and too selfishly . . . then we run the risk of missing what is right in front of us — of seeing what is being revealed to us in those ordinary times and places.

In those moments when life seems too hard to handle, and too difficult to move on, or too impossible to see what’s next, when we retreat into our places of reservation, the Lord shows up there too. Jesus shows up especially at those times when we least expect it; especially in the most unfamiliar ways.

Last year, in May of 2015, before I started here at Village, I was in New York selling textile designs: That was my job before and during seminary. I was on a busy city sidewalk during rush hour, wheeling my heavy portfolios around with a handcart. I was tired and I was frustrated. All I wanted to do was go back to the apartment and just lay down and rest.

I came to the subway stop, the one that has elevator access

to the platforms, and I pushed the button. And nothing happened. It took me a while to realize that nothing was happening, but such is the case. The elevators were broken. So I had to walk downtown several blocks in order to get to the next subway stop with elevators.

As I was walking, like a salmon swimming upstream, pulling my cases, my head cast down, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a young man wheeling his wheelchair. I began to move over to the side because my stuff is rather cumbersome, and I didn’t want to be in his way. As he approached me, my head began to lift up a bit, and I noticed his arm, and the tattoos he had on them. Just as he began to wheel past me, it occurred to me that I recognized those tattoos. I had seen that artwork before.

Right as the young man passed by me, what surprised me was a name popped into my head. I said to myself, “Steve.” I had no idea why I was saying it, but I said, “Steve.” And then I turned around, and I said it a little louder. I said, “Steve?” The man in the wheelchair stopped and started to wheel around to face me. Then I said it again, “Steve, is that you?”

You see, I had met Steve the summer before in the ICU at Roosevelt Hospital when I was serving as a chaplain intern. I was afraid I might startle Steve — because you see Steve was in a coma when I first met him. He actually was in a coma for about eight of the twelve weeks that I worked there. Every week, if not two or three times a week, I went to pray with Steve’s mother and sister

and his friends. We prayed that he would make a full recovery, and that he would come through this and get back to the life he knew and loved.

And here he was a year later, wheeling past me in his chair. If I had seen his face or looked in his eyes, I probably wouldn't have recognized him. But it was his actions of wheeling his chair that made me see his hands ... and then notice the tattoos on his arms ... and then remember his name. And he remembered me as well; at least he remembered the last couple of weeks we got to know each other.

We shared a good laugh and a special moment on a busy sidewalk. He told me he was headed to meet his family, to celebrate his sister's birthday. I said, "Be sure to send them my love, and give your mother a big hug from me." His mother, Louise, is still in touch with me. Every so often, we text each other and keep in touch through Facebook.

It wasn't his face I recognized on that busy sidewalk. It was out of his actions that I remembered him and his story. It was out of the actions that I recognized the artwork on his arms. It was out of his actions that I responded with his name. Sometimes we recognize Jesus in our lives, but most times we don't.

Sometimes we see a divine moment passing us by; other times we miss them.

Sometimes we feel Jesus walking beside us, picking us up, touching our hearts. Other times, like the two men walking to Emmaus, we find ourselves going along hopeless, caught up in

the details of our own struggles, blinded by the sun setting on our futures, stuck in our skepticism and restless in our reservations. We are slow of heart to believe that God is doing something new right in front of us. And that's when we find ourselves strongly urging him to stay with us, to keep walking with us, to keep showing up and pointing us back toward Jerusalem.

I guess there is still one other thing I have yet to mention about this story. This sermon series is about the table, right? I guess I should get there, uh? My friends, we all have our own roads and our own Emmauses. And sometimes we need to take long walks on them. But we are never alone. And the one common thing we share is not necessarily the road or the walk, per se; it's that these journeys lead us to a table — a table we so desperately need; a table where our spirits are nourished and our energy renewed to keep walking.

This story is all about how Jesus meets us at a meal. Jesus is always meeting us at a meal. What is important to remember about this story is that Jesus met them at their table. Jesus can meet us at any table, at every table. What is important to remember is that at the table, Jesus is both our guest and our host.

This story never really tells us they recognized Jesus' face. Maybe our eyes will always be kept from recognizing his face. But in his actions at the table, in our own actions in the world, maybe we will recognize his hands — or his arms as they extended out to others and to us. How these two

men come to know Jesus is how we all come to know Jesus. It's on "the walk" — on the walk when Jesus opens up the Scriptures to us and tells us about God's eternal love. It is through his actions at the table where we remember the story.

But to tell the story for ourselves, we must first remember the story at the table, where Jesus is both our guest and our host. Four simple actions: That is how Christ is made known to us in ordinary bread. Four simple actions — because when he was at the table, he took bread, he blessed and broke it, and then he gave it to them ... to the two of them ... to all of us.

It was not his face that they noticed; it was his actions. In his actions, they remembered the story. In his actions, they recognized his hands and arms. In his action, they responded: "He is alive. He is risen. The Lord has risen indeed." Hopefully, in our own ordinary actions, we will remember and recognize and respond and see the extraordinary and divine moments we are intended to see unfolding right before our eyes.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all, thanks be to God.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.