

# A GOOD WORD FOR THOSE WHO MISSED EASTER<sup>1</sup>

Luke 24: 13-35

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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I missed the breaking news about Bin Laden's death last Sunday evening because I went to bed early. Monday morning I was busy getting ready for work, so I didn't hear many details. But at noon, when I went home for lunch, I sat down in front of the TV to get more details. I think my primary emotion was relief, and as I listened to the details that were emerging, I found myself crying.

I thought about that, and finally concluded that across the country and even around the world, the pool of emotions over the events of 9/11 and beyond are just beneath the surface. My tears were for all those who died brutally on 9/11 and those who have died since then. We grieve for all the pain and loss families have experienced since then. There are many mothers of all religions, nationalities, races, and cultures, who weep on this Mother's Day for the children who have been lost due to terrorism. Today we remember parents and grandparents who spend their days praying for their children who serve in Afghanistan or Iraq.

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In a world of such violence, it is not irrelevant that we spend time every year looking closely at the Easter stories. These stories help us understand ourselves and our emotions. Consider the story of two people walking to Emmaus.

Clearly, they are filled with a strange mix of emotions. Grief is there, just like grief is with us; they truly loved that man who had been crucified. All their hopes that had been built up in him were dashed. Listen to their wistfulness as they tell the stranger who has joined them: *...we had hoped that he was the one...*, they said. How many of our own emotions are prefaced by the same phrase: *...we had hoped...?* They were deeply saddened. But then there was the news of his resurrection. Hear these two as they relate the story to the stranger who has joined them: *Some women of our group astounded us*, they said. That has to be one of the great understatements of the New Testament!

So their emotions were mixed. They were filled with sadness and yet wondered about the news from the women who had astounded them. These were two followers of Jesus who were in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion; perhaps they even witnessed the crucifixion; and they had heard of the resurrection. But they missed it. They missed the reality of the resurrection!

Some people always miss the resurrection! They are here for worship on Easter Sunday; they are present and accounted for. But for some reason they failed to experience the resurrection. Perhaps some were too busy and preoccupied;

others may have been so filled with all the emotions of loss and grief and anxiety that they failed to experience the hallelujahs that they heard on Easter Sunday. If you are like the many people who were present for Easter but were not filled with the reality and sense of hope and joy that Easter brings, then this sermon is for you.

## II

There are several things about this story that are striking. The first is that there is no such known place as Emmaus. Geographers of the Bible can find no place called Emmaus located seven miles from Jerusalem. The name “Emmaus” means “warm wells,” which could very well be symbol of Jesus as the water of life. Emmaus is described as being seven miles from Jerusalem, and the number seven is almost always symbolic.

These facts make me wonder if this story was from the beginning meant to be a parable. Maybe the road to Emmaus is meant to be your commute to work. For some, it may be the road from the grocery store to the dry cleaners to the service station to the school to the soccer field and back home. For some the road to Emmaus may be the line through security at the airport and the walk to seat 26C on the flight to Minneapolis. For some, the road to Emmaus may be the slow, painful path from bed to chair and the drawn-out hours by the window. So the idea

that the road to Emmaus may be meant to be whatever road you and I travel throws a whole new light on this story.

Then there is the Christ walking along beside them listening to their story. The text of the story is quite revealing here: *Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.* Here were two people who were filled with mixed emotions. They were confused and angry and frustrated and grief-stricken. They were certainly not looking for Jesus to join them; nor did they expect him to join them. Yet he walked along with them.

Does that tell you something important about the risen Christ? If this story truly is a kind of parable, it suggests to me that the presence of Christ with us is not dependent on our understanding the resurrection or rationally figuring out the resurrection! The presence of the risen Christ is not dependent on our sorting out our emotions about the resurrection. Christ walks along beside us on our road to Emmaus, and often we don't even recognize him. Yet he is there; he listens to us; he understands; he fulfills his promise: *I am with you always....*<sup>2</sup>

If you think you may have missed Easter this year, don't expect Easter to become real to you in some dramatic setting or majestic appearance of Christ. And don't expect the reality of Easter to become real just when you hear the Hallelujah Chorus, as much as it is loved. Rather, you can expect Easter to happen to you as

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28: 20

you walk along some dusty road of life, never expecting an appearance of Christ; yet he shows up walking beside us in all our worries and our frustrations and our misunderstandings and our humanness.

### III

There is a final scene in the story, and it happens around the dinner table. If this story is really meant to be a parable, then the final scene is clearly an image of the Lord's Supper. It refers to worship. The text actually uses language reminiscent of the Lord's Supper: *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*<sup>3</sup> This is clearly a reference to Christian worship.

It is in the context of Christian worship that *their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*<sup>4</sup> Just for a fleeting moment, Christ is recognized, and then he is gone.

On any given Sunday in contemporary America, modern disciples of Jesus come walking through the doors of the church on their Emmaus Road. Some are weighed down with all sorts of problems, stress, and dilemmas. There are sophisticated lawyers and skeptical scientists and parents who are caring for their parents while caring for their teenagers. There are many skilled practitioners of the

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24: 30.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24: 31.

ways of the world who come here to worship. You may be preoccupied with appointments, spread-sheets, statistics, reports to prepare, studies, and recommendations.

But one thing we all have in common is that we often fail to recognize the stranger who has been walking beside us all along the way. And then we gather for worship, sing the old hymns and learn new ones, offer our prayers, offer our gifts, hear the word read and spoken, and somehow in that process there are times when we recognize the presence of a stranger, if only for a fleeting moment.

But that moment is enough. This story is not a spiritual Camelot focused on the past. It is a sign of the way the risen Christ continues to walk beside us in the turbulence of our lives and to be present among us as we gather for worship.

#### IV

Novelist Frederich Buechner imagines that Emmaus represents any place we go in order to escape. He thinks of these two companions leaving Jerusalem just to get away, to say, “Let the whole thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.” Emmaus, says Buechner, is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget... that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas about love and freedom and justice—can be twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966), pp. 85-86.

When life seems to get too much for us, Emmaus may be our retreat, and the road to Emmaus holds many surprises. But once we get to our Emmaus, the biggest surprise of all is that the living Christ is with us, breaking the bread of life that sustains us to this very day.