

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Luke 24:13–35

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God’s spirit.

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Draw us close, Holy Spirit, as the Scriptures are read, and the Word is proclaimed. Let the word of faith be on our lips and in our hearts, and let all other words slip away. May we hear your voice of truth and grace. Amen.

Luke 24:13–35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did

not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Like most good stories in scripture, there is so much to think about with this story, the story of the disciples travelling to Emmaus and encountering Jesus along the way. A number of things catch my imagination with this story.

The first is how much this story reflects what we do every Sunday. Similar to last week when the early church was described as gathering together to worship and to break bread, this story is almost like a

template for what we do when we gather every week. We journey together. The two travelers are met on the road. We discuss the events of our lives, we talk about our hopes, and then we turn to scripture, and they are opened in a way that touch us, that perhaps move us, comfort us, challenge us, or even correct us. We then share in a meal that reveals the identity and presence of Christ. In our best and most lucid moments, we see clearly what and whom we have known, and then we are moved and sent out to share and live the good news. It's the pattern of worship, gathering together, time in the word, the sharing of a sacred meal, and then being sent out into the community to tell others what we have discovered. Perhaps this story resonates deeply with so many because the structure of the story itself is what we enact each week as the gathered community. In fact, I think this story reflects our entire journey of faith.

As we gather together, we journey together. This is one aspect of this story that strikes me, it's the shared journey. It is two people that are travelling together, and then they are joined by a third. When I hear the beginning of this story, "Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus," and then I hear also that Jesus has joined them, I hear the echo of the scripture that says, "wherever two or three are gathered..."

Faith is a community endeavor. Faith is meant to be shared. The stories in the bible continually talk of people together. The stories that surround Easter and the interaction with the resurrected Jesus are done together. In fact, when people recognize the risen Christ amongst them, they go to tell others. The women run from the tomb on Easter morning. In this Emmaus story, as soon as the two recognize Jesus, their first response is to immediately go back to Jerusalem to tell the others. And it's one thing to race back from the tomb on the outskirts of town to the Upper Room, but it's another thing entirely to have the disciples run from Emmaus

back to Jerusalem. It's seven miles, and it's in the evening after they have already walked the seven miles to get there. But there it is in verse 33, after recognizing Jesus, "That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem." Nothing like a nice jog at night after a long day on the road! But their experience is so compelling that they must find others with which to share it. They run back to Jerusalem where the disciples are staying, and they share what has happened to them. They also have heard from the disciples about their experiences with Jesus. Together they share and support and encourage one another. As one preacher puts it, "The resurrection is not a fact to be believed, but an experience to be shared."ⁱ

Our faith is not something that can deepen, not something that can be practiced, without a community. We cannot be spiritual lone rangers. Our faith thrives in the gathered community of care and concern. Henri Nouwen says, "Christian community is the place where we keep the flame of hope alive among us..., That is how we dare say that God is a God of love when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in each other."ⁱⁱ

And this is also what happens on the road to Emmaus, and another aspect of the story that I find so interesting. As the two followers are walking along and discussing the events that had just occurred, and as Jesus comes along side of them and asks what they are talking about. One replies, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him." And then the disciple utters four very powerful words. The disciple says, "But we had hoped..."

“But we had hoped...” So much in so few words. “they speak of a future that is not to be, a dream that created energy and enthusiasm but did not materialize, a promise that created faith that proved to be false. It speaks of a future that is closed off, now irrelevant, dead. And there are few things more tragic than a dead future... It’s not just the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but the gaping hole of all that could have happened but won’t.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These words are words that ring true to our ears. They are not the only truth, there is beauty, and joy, and resurrection, but even in the midst of that, there is disappointment, and heartbreak, and failure. And sometimes, maybe a lot of the time, particularly as we are still in the celebration of Easter, we move away from the disappointment of “But we had hoped...” a little too quickly and a little too easily. When the two disciples state their dashed hopes, Jesus doesn’t jump up and down and say, “no, look, I’m alive, see!” instead he walks with them, and engages them in the promises of scriptures and the hope of the prophets. He allows them to lament in the future that will never be.

This is what we do in community. We care for one another, and we let people voice what needs to be voiced, the pain, the hurt, the disappointment, and the failure, as we walk with them. The job or promotion that never materialized, the baby that was never conceived, the person whose illness never got better, the addiction that was not overcome, the partner who was betrayed. We had hoped... We had hoped... We do not gloss over it, but we carry it, and we carry it together. And we hope for better days. We hope for the presence of the risen Christ. And when we recognize it, we run and tell others. Faith is a journey that is shared in the ups and the downs, and it is shared together.

Thinking about the ups and downs of our journey leads me to a third aspect of the story that I find fascinating and telling for our own faith journey, and that is the movement in the story. It's not direct, and it's not a straight line, and it goes places that perhaps you don't expect. I am certain that the two disciples setting out from Jerusalem to Emmaus never thought they would end their day back in Jerusalem. The journey of faith is ongoing and winding. It is a journey that sometimes moves quickly, and other times moves slowly or not at all. Our faith doesn't stay in one place, nor should we expect it to. As we have experiences, as we meet others along the way, we are affected and shaped by those experiences and people. We continually, if we are mindful about it, deepen our faith. But within that journey there are times when we feel closer to God and times when we feel far away. There are times, like the two on the road to Emmaus, when we cannot recognize Jesus, and then there are those times when Jesus is as clear to us as if we were sitting across the table from him and having a meal.

There are many spiritual practices that one might try to help deepen faith. And while I tend to like those practices that involve others in conversation, one thing I do like to do on my own, is walk a labyrinth. One of the reasons I like to do this is because it reminds me that the spiritual journey is not always a straight line.

A labyrinth is an ancient symbol that represents wholeness. It combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. It looks like a maze but is not. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no dead-ends. You cannot get lost. You just follow the path to the center and out again.

Labyrinths come in different shapes and sizes, but the one I am most familiar with, and the ones I like the most are modeled after a labyrinth in Chartres, France. The Chartres labyrinth was built into the floor of the

cathedral in about 1200 AD. It has 11 circuits or levels, and twists and turns through four quadrants of a circle. The middle space is a six-petal rosette where you can sit and rest before heading out again. As you walk the labyrinth, you quickly move close to the center, but then just as quickly again you are on the outer edge, and then almost without realizing it, you are in the center.

As I walk the labyrinth, I am reminded that throughout my journey, with all its twists and turns, that as long as I am continually moving, I eventually find the center. I will never be utterly lost; the path will take me to the center and back out again. It reminds me of words from Psalm 139, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me... You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways... You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

One other aspect that strikes me with the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, is how hospitality is shown, and how faith is enacted. The entire time that Jesus is walking alongside the disciples on the road, they do not see him. They have been told by the women earlier in the day that Jesus was resurrected, but they have not believed. They’ve been told about the resurrected Lord, but they have not experienced the resurrected Lord. As they come to Emmaus, the story tells us, Jesus “walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

Notice that while Jesus is finally recognized in the breaking of the bread and during the meal (and it's hard to miss the reference here to the Lord's Supper which we will celebrate shortly), while Jesus is recognized in the meal that is shared, it took the two disciples to invite Jesus to the table. As they get near the village, Jesus continues on, but the disciples "urged him strongly" to stay and have fellowship with them. Can't you just picture Jesus? As the disciples turn onto a new road to go into the village, Jesus continues on the main road, maybe slowing his pace a bit, and glancing over his shoulder. Will they recognize the stranger is going a different route? Will they invite him to abide with them? And maybe after a minute they do recognize that the stranger intended to continue on, and their faith kicks in. They must invite the stranger to dinner. They insist strongly in fact.

It is the disciples that extend hospitality to the stranger, that offer to care for the other, that allows the meal to happen. It requires a giving of themselves to experience the living Christ finally.

Not until their faith is enacted by engaging in table fellowship with the stranger do, they truly see Jesus. Conversation is easy, particularly as you are walking side by side and you don't need to even look at one another face to face, but to sit at a meal with someone, there is something deeper about that. There is something more intimate about that. It requires more from you than just idle conversation.

It's as if this story tells us that to truly see Jesus, we must engage in meaningful ways with the other, with the stranger. We must take the risk of being hospitable to those in our midst that are not familiar to us. And more than just being hospitable (although that is hugely important) it really is about having an engaged and active faith. That in engagement, in embodiment, that is where we can recognize Jesus among us. And when we have those experiences, when we encounter Jesus, we are

moved to share the experience with others because we want them to have the same thing.

I love the story of the road to Emmaus because it grounds me, because it guides me, because it gives me a model for my faith. It reminds me that the journey of faith is a journey of community. I cannot go it alone. It reminds me that my faith is a faith that takes my whole self: the good and the bad, the ups and the downs, the joys and the disappointment of dashed hope. The story reminds me that the journey of faith is not a straight line, but a winding journey where sometimes I don't even recognize Jesus, and other times when my eyes are open wide. I love this story, because it challenges me to be open to the other, to the stranger, but more so, because it challenges me to live my faith. It challenges me to enact my faith in real and tangible ways.

I love this story because it allows me to see myself. It allows me to see my faith community. It allows me to see the stranger. And it allows me to see the risen Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Wink, "Resonating With God's Song," *The Christian Century* (March 23, 1994).

ⁱⁱ <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/waiting-in-community/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3188>