

“The Emmaus Road”  
Luke 24:13-35  
Sunday, May 8, 2011  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

A first grade Sunday School class had been talking about the first people Jesus called to be his followers – the disciples. The next Sunday the teacher reviewed the lesson, asking the children what these first helpers of Jesus were called. There was a long pause. Then one child eagerly raised a hand and exclaimed, “The Recycles!”

This child may have given us a good image for who disciples are. Disciples are people who have been recycled by God, taken from the waste can of human despair and transformed into new people of hope. But this is not an easy process. In order to become people of hope we must know the risen Christ. The story of the Emmaus Road offers us a way of living that brings such knowledge.

**I. The Jarring Experience**

Two disciples walked on the road to Emmaus many years ago. All we know about them is that one of them was named Cleopas. They did not feel at all hopeful. They were perhaps at the lowest point of their lives. Leaving Jerusalem behind them, they were escaping in fear and defeat. Jesus was dead. Their lives were in danger. Their friends had scattered. They had heard rumors that some women had seen a vision of angels. The women said Jesus was alive. But Cleopas and his friend only felt more confused by the rumor.

So, the starting point for their walk to Emmaus is a horrible, painful event – Jesus’ crucifixion and death. Robert McAfee Brown calls it a “jarring experience.” A jarring experience happens as a result of our action in the world. We risk committing ourselves to

something. When the results are not as we expect, this is a jarring event. For Cleopas and his friend, Jesus' death was doubly jarring because they had expected Jesus to be a hero, not a martyr.

Jarring experiences happen to us all the time. We expect to be hired after a great interview for a new job and receive instead a rejection letter. We expect to watch our children grow into adulthood and are devastated by a child's death. We expect our children to care for us in our old age and are dismayed when they want to have nothing to do with us. We expect friends to be with us always and are shocked when they leave us. Historically we can name countless jarring events, such as Auschwitz, the death of JFK, the Vietnam War, the recent economic crisis.

Just this past weekend we have had two reminders of jarring experiences. The Royal Wedding of Catherine Middleton and Prince William cannot help but stir up memories of Princess Diana and her tragic death on August 31, 1997. And on Sunday, no more than two days after the big wedding, we get the news that Osama bin Laden is dead. As revelers celebrate in the streets, waving American flags and cheering – justice has finally been done! -- we also remember the grief and the trauma of 9/11. It has been nearly 10 years since the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center went down, and the Pentagon was hit, and a hi-jacked airplane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania.

Jarring experiences.

Brett Blair tells this story, “about a young boy named Walter Elias. Born in the city, his parents one day moved out to the country to become farmers. Walter had a vivid imagination and the farm was the perfect place for a young boy and a wondering mind. One day in the apple orchard he was amazed when he saw sitting on a branch of one of the apple trees an owl. He just

stood there and stared at the owl. He thought about what his father had told him about owls: owls always rested during the day because they hunted throughout the night. This owl was asleep. He also thought that this owl might make a great pet.

“Being careful not to make any noises he stepped over sticks and leaves. The owl was in a deep sleep because it never heard Walter Elias walking toward it. Finally, standing under the owl, he reached up and grabbed the owl by the legs. Now, the events that followed are difficult to explain. Suddenly everything was utter chaos. The owl came to life. Walter’s thoughts about keeping the bird as a pet were quickly forgotten. The air filled with wings, and feathers, and screaming. In the excitement Walter held the legs tighter. And in his panic, Walter Elias, still holding on to the owl, threw it to the ground and stomped it to death. After things calmed down, Walter looked at the now dead and bloody bird and began to cry. He ran back to the farm, obtained a shovel, and buried the owl in the orchard.

“At night he would dream of that owl. As the years passed he never got over what had happened that summer day. Deep down it affected him for the rest of his life. As an older man he said he never, ever killed anything again. Do you see it? Something significant happened after that event. Something that Walter didn’t miss. Something which transformed Walter Elias, something that redeemed him from the pit of despair, something that resurrected him, something that made Walter Elias Disney give life to thousands of animals on the big screen.

“The resurrection changes everything. It transforms us. It moves us from despair to new possibilities of life. It takes us in our blindness and opens our eyes. It transforms ordinary bread into a holy meal. It takes two sad and lost brothers on the road to Emmaus who had lost the only world they knew and gives it back to them. Jesus comes to them and says see I am not dead. I am alive. Now tell the world.”

As Cleopas and his friend walk the Emmaus Road together, it is likely that they feel despair, that Israel is without hope. And yet something life-changing awaits them on that walk. The story of the Emmaus Road suggests ways to find hope and empowerment in the face life's jarring experiences.

## **II. Sharing the Pain**

On the Emmaus Road Cleopas and his friend talk together about their painful experience of Jesus' death. As they walk along, Jesus joins them and walks with them. Jesus asks what they are discussing. They stand still, looking sad. This is an important moment. In the past few days they have been spinning in a rush of events over which they have had no control. As often happens in crisis situations, they have gone numb with fear and pain, overwhelmed by it all.

Now, on the Emmaus Road, Jesus opens up a place for them to be silent, to feel their pain, to stop and reflect on the things that have happened. Jesus listens as they begin to retell the story. Jesus listens as they share their deepest dreams and the pain of their loss. They tell Jesus that the authorities, "...delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Jesus listens as they share their confusion and amazement about the women's story. No one believes it, but the women say they have seen angels who proclaim that Jesus is alive.

When someone listens to our stories of pain, it helps to lessen the hurt. When we listen to someone else's pain, we become for them the presence of Christ. We can learn from the Emmaus story how to listen to others. Jesus asks the two disciples to tell their story. He remains with them in the stillness and sadness that precedes their sharing. And he does not interrupt them until their story is finished.

Alice Walker writes in a personal way about the good that can come from honoring painful experiences. She says, “I have found that pain, rather than being something to avoid – which is what we’re taught – is something from which you get an awful lot. It’s one of the areas of life in which you are forced to see yourself. Therefore, it’s quite a wonderful thing. If you can bear the self-scrutiny that always comes with pain, it’s very enriching.”

Our two disciples have faced their pain and shared it openly with Jesus. It is clear that they are caught between fear and hope. They want to believe that Jesus is alive, and yet they don’t want to get their hopes up because they know it can’t possibly be true.

Jesus meets them in their confusion and shows them how the scriptures support the women’s story of hope. Reflection on their jarring experience is broadened to include the perspective of scripture. Jesus teaches them that the whole of scripture, from Moses through the Prophets, is filled with the truth of God’s saving power. In short, Jesus leads Cleopas and his friend in a bible study!

Jonathan Pryke tells of a vicar who, one Sunday, “was doing a children's talk, using a telephone to illustrate the idea of prayer. ‘You talk to people on the telephone but you don't see them on the other end of the line, do you?’ he began. The children shook their heads. ‘Well, talking to God is like talking on the telephone. He's on the other end, but you can't see him. He's listening though.’ Just then a little boy piped up and asked, ‘What's his number?’”

Pryke continues, “We don't need a telephone number to get through to God. We just need to know Jesus. He walks beside us by his Spirit. We can talk to him at any time. He wants us to keep talking. He always listens. He always understands.”

I would add that a bit of bible study can go a long way towards opening our hearts and minds to the presence of Jesus among us.

David E. Leininger makes a reference to Louis Armstrong, in his book, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time:

“Asked by a persistent reporter to define the meaning of jazz, legendary trumpeter Louis Armstrong is reputed to have answered, ‘If you have to ask the question, you’ll never know.’ Something similar is true of Jesus’ revelation of himself in our lesson. We do not reach Jesus by dint of our own effort. We know him only because he chooses to reveal himself to us. He does so not dramatically and with power, but humbly and personally. The risen Jesus does not appear to the rich and famous, the movers and shakers of that time. He does not show up before the throne of the emperor in Rome, demanding to be vindicated. Rather, he falls in beside a couple of dispirited wanderers who are wending their way home after having their hopes dashed.”

Cleopas and his friend are so moved by Jesus’ bible teachings that they invite him to stay with them for the night. During the evening meal Jesus becomes known to them in the breaking of the bread. Jesus’ bible teachings prepare their hearts for understanding. The sharing of a meal opens their hearts to full recognition of Jesus.

### **III. Sharing the Word and the Meal**

Here, then, is another way in which the story of the Emmaus Road offers hope and empowerment in the face of life’s jarring experiences. Our hearts can be opened to the hope of the living Christ as we turn to the scriptures and as we share meals together. When we study the bible together and when we eat together, Christ is there with us. We find hope in the word and in the fellowship. As the Church, we find hope in the proclamation of the Word and in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in Life Together: "The Scriptures speak of three kinds of table fellowship that Jesus keeps with his own: daily fellowship at table, the table fellowship of the Lord's Supper, and the final table fellowship in the kingdom of God. But in all three, the one thing that counts is that 'their eyes were opened, and they knew him.'

"The fellowship of the table teaches Christians that here they still eat the perishable bread of the earthly pilgrimage. But if they share this bread with one another, they shall also one day receive the imperishable bread together in the Father's house."

Maybe, ultimately, we see Christ most clearly by sharing one another's burdens. Each person here today has a story to tell of hurt or pain in their lives. We need to listen to one another more. We need to be open to the pain behind cheerful smiles and pleasant small talk. Only when we are able to hear one another's pain will we be able to recognize Jesus in the scriptures and in the breaking of the bread.

I close with this story, as shared by Jef Olson in his book, Hearts Burning Within:

"There was once a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. He knew it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch -- four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer.

"He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park. On one of the park benches sat an old woman looking at the pigeons.

"The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other one. Once again she smiled that beautiful smile.

“For a long time the two sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally, the little boy realized that it was getting late and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before.

“When he arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. ‘What did you do today?’ she asked. ‘Oh, I had lunch in the park with God,’ he said. Before his mother could reply, he added, ‘You know, she has the most beautiful smile in the world.’

“Meanwhile, the old woman left the park and returned to her home.

“Her son noticed something different about her. ‘What did you do today, Mom?’ he asked. ‘Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God.’ And before her son could say anything at all, she added, ‘You know, God’s a lot younger than I imagined.’”

### **Closing.**

The story of the Emmaus Road does not end with the two disciple’s recognition of Jesus. After Jesus disappears, Cleopas and his friend talk excitedly about how their hearts had burned within them as Jesus talked with them on the road.

They make a decision to return to Jerusalem, to the place where their pain began. There they again open themselves to the risks of life. They face the pain of life with new hope. Even though they will be jarred by life’s experiences in ways they cannot predict, they know that the Christ who met them on the Emmaus Road will meet them again and show them the way. That same Christ meets us, too, even if we do not recognize him. When we listen to one another’s pain, Jesus opens our eyes. When we study his word and break bread together, he is with us.

That is how – together! -- we find the hope we need to face the challenges of life.  
Amen.