
The Emmaus Road

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday of Easter

*The disciples told what had happened on the road,
and how he had been made known in the breaking of bread.*

Luke 24.35

Just days after the bitter betrayal and horrifying crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and just a few days after stories began to circulate that Jesus had risen from the dead, while the world moved in a stupor of empire and wandering, two disciples of this Jesus were walking away from Jerusalem.

They were walking on the Emmaus Road. They were on a journey; and, on that journey, they were talking about current events. They were a lot like us, talking about current events while they were on the road. The death of Jesus was primary among their topics.

A stranger joined them on the journey, just like a stranger might come and sit beside us on the subway, or on the airplane; and this stranger joins the conversation. He asks about this Jesus character.

"Yeah," said one, "and we thought he was the one who would restore Israel." The three of them talked about God. They talked about scripture; the stranger was remarkably helpful. He explained all sorts of things about scripture.

Do you ever talk about God while you are walking down the sidewalk? Do you ever discuss the Bible while you are driving down the street? Do you speak of grief and hope while you are on your daily journeys?

Last week, I listened to a delightful man talk about the history of Christianity. This man is eighty years old, and his mind and spirit are still dancing vigorously. He danced his way through the centuries of the Celtic development of Christianity (the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, AD.). He pondered where the church is right now, and how we might resemble the Celtic church, which developed when the Roman Empire was dissolving away.

At one point, my old friend made a rather casual and un-related remark. But it has stuck with me this past week. Maybe it has stuck with me because I have been traveling. Earlier this week, I was gathered with a group of collegial clergy. We shared our years' stories. We shared grief and hope. We listened to ideas and questions.

It was there that I heard this eighty-year old retired priest speak of Christian history with a spring in his step. He was Herb O'Driscoll, the retired dean of Christ Church Cathedral, in Vancouver, British Columbia.

He said, "You know, I was born in 1928. I learned the Christian faith in a dramatically different way than people learn it today. When I learned the Christian faith, it was a set of propositions. It was belief statements. Christian faith was the right answers to the catechism questions."

"But today," he continued, "we talk about faith as a journey. Faith is a walk; it is a pilgrimage; it is a journey. This image seems perfectly natural to us. But do you realize how different that concept is from what we learned just fifty or sixty years ago? Just sixty years ago, faith was a system. Christian faith was a deposit of propositions and statements. We now speak easily of faith as a journey."

Herb O'Driscoll was right. Our present age shares much with the age in which Celtic Christianity developed. Large empires, superpowers if you will, were gradually dissolving in the fourth and fifth and sixth centuries; but a Celtic Christianity was gradually growing.

That Celtic Christianity knew how to journey. They resisted empire and superpower and institution. They developed communities of faith away from urban centers of power. They valued intimate relationships, trust and openness, God's revelation in creation.

Today, many of us are doing a lot of journeying, too -spiritually and physically. Simply put, we move around a lot. We drive down the road to work each morning. The radio is on, and we are listening to the news and current events, or to a talk show, or to our favorite music. We drive down the Emmaus Road when we take our children to school. We travel down an Emmaus Road when we return home from work. We walk the road to the grocery store.

What are the words being spoken then? Who is in the car with us? What is the conversation? Is there a word for us there, in those radio shows, or in that music? Who is speaking to us?

We fly in airplanes to our next business engagement. We read the old business headlines. We glance at the trendy magazines. What are the words we see there?

We travel down many roads to Emmaus in our lives. What if we listened to the Emmaus Road story in our souls as we journeyed down those roads?

In the Emmaus Road story, the two disciples decided to stop for the night. They invited their conversation partner to join them. At supper, the stranger took some bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread, and gave the bread to the small group. He took the bread and did the same thing with it that we do here in church every Sunday: he took, blessed, broke, and gave. It was Holy Communion.

At that moment, the two disciples are astounded. It was Jesus himself! He is the one who has been walking with them, talking with them, speaking to them about God and scripture. And they did not even know it was him! They did not recognize him!

But when Jesus -the stranger""sat with them at table, and when he broke bread with the two disciples, suddenly their eyes were opened.

"Didn't our hearts burn when he talked about scripture?" they reminded themselves. They told the story to others. It finally got written down in the Gospel of Luke. The disciples did not recognize Jesus until he explained scripture and blessed bread. The disciples knew the Lord Jesus in scripture and the breaking of bread.

That is the power of the Emmaus Road story. No matter what roads we are walking in this life. No matter whether it is Peachtree Road, or the Downtown Connector, or the Perimeter, or Georgia 400. It may be the soccer practice road, the business road, the school road, the MARTA line, the bus route, the airplane route to our next job.

When we are Christians, that road can be an Emmaus Road. When we are Christians, we know that the Emmaus Road will lead to the breaking of bread in holy communion somewhere.

That road turns into an Emmaus Road when we realize that Jesus is with us. Perhaps we do not recognize Jesus at first. Maybe we think that this fellow traveler is just a stranger.

Maybe our fellow traveler is someone we thought we knew quite well: our despondent husband, our cranky child, our

weird business associate. If we make scripture and the breaking of bread part of our journey, that fellow traveler can become Christ among us. Maybe that fellow traveler is someone we thought was an enemy, or someone who has betrayed us.

I heard another story this past week, a story from a great preacher in Chicago. He told the story of a great theologian who visited the University of Chicago Divinity School in the 1950's. The theologian gave a three hour lecture, in which he (quote) "proved" (unquote) that the historical resurrection of Jesus was not factual. It was a so-called "myth."

And then, the story goes, the great theologian concluded his talk by saying this: "Because the black American religious experience is based on a supposed relationship with "a Risen Lord" - who, in fact, didn't exist - black American spirituality is nothing more than "emotional mumbo-jumbo."

Then, the great theologian asked the packed lecture hall: "Are there any questions?" The silence was deafening, goes the story, until an old black preacher with white hair stood up in the back of the auditorium. The old preacher reached into his brown bag lunch and pulled out an apple. As he loudly, chomped and munched on his apple, the old black preacher asked: "Was this apple I just ate - bitter or sweet?"

The theologian responded: "I can't answer that question because I haven't tasted your apple." The old preacher pounced on the opportunity, "And neither have you tasted my Jesus," he said.

It's a great story. Our journey is about tasting Jesus, not just hearing about Jesus. Our journey leads us to meals with strangers, when we taste and see that the Lord is good. In an age of strange atheism, there is no substitute for tasting Jesus himself.

When we are on the Emmaus Road, Jesus shows up where we least expect him. The road is filled with grief and hope, chagrin and joy, strangers and friends. But our fellow traveler is always Jesus, showing up in scripture and the breaking of bread - showing up in scripture and the breaking of bread" again and again.

Faith is a journey. Faith is the Emmaus Road journey, when we are surprised by strangers, when scripture and bread are opened up and broken before us. When we walk the Emmaus Road, Easter -the resurrection!- is not just one day. The risen Christ -Easter!-- appears over and over again.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

AMEN.

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