

“On the Road Again”*Luke 24: 13-35*

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I've always been fascinated by the stories that follow on the heels of the gospel's witness to the resurrection. In fact, in the gospel according to Luke, the author barely takes a breath between telling us, through the lens of female followers of Christ, that the tomb was empty and placing the reader's feet firmly on the road to Emmaus. The women were at the tomb, of course, because the burial of Jesus had been rushed. He was laid to rest as the last flickers of sunlight disappeared, beginning the Jewish Sabbath where no work could be done, not even anointing a body. With the Sabbath over and the markets open, the women returned with spices early in the morning to the tomb, where Jesus' body would be left over several months to decompose before the bones would be collected, and put in an ossuary. The resurrection event causes shock and confusion within the community of disciples, however. With no body present the women are speechless, Peter is speechless, but Cleopas, a follower of Jesus, is on the move. Luke records the event like this

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

Without even pausing for a breath, Luke the storyteller has us on the road to Emmaus, an ordinary road, walking with Cleopas and another disciple. What's the other disciple's name? Well, trick question. The disciple is never named. Some feel the disciple is unnamed on purpose – so that we can feel free to substitute *our name* instead. *We* are on the road to Emmaus – a forgettable little village seven miles northwest of Jerusalem. Today, of course, there are competing claims to the “authentic Emmaus” and it's funny, but the guy working in the gift shop at each location will swear it's the *real* Emmaus. No bother, after all, the Emmaus road was just an ordinary trail leading away from Jerusalem.

As Cleopas and the other disciple walk along, they are in a heated conversation – the Greek words used here mean chitchat and discussion or debate. What are they talking about? They are talking about all that has happened in the city that week.

And then they encounter a stranger. Now, they are walking during the day because it is safer, bandits can be found on the road if you recall the parable of the Good Samaritan, and this safe-looking stranger makes them strong – three people on the journey – on that ordinary road going to Emmaus. Now the Bible lets us in on a little secret right away – *the stranger is Jesus* – and somehow they are kept from recognizing him. Now, some people have trouble getting past this part of the story. How could they not recognize him? You should recognize your faith leader, your pastor, when you see him. I recall several years ago being at a Vancouver Canucks hockey game with my young son Jack, when I was asked by a Canucks' representative if I wanted to participate in an inner tube rolling contest for prizes during the intermission on the

ice. Well, of course, who doesn't want to do that? As I gingerly walked out onto the Roger's arena ice surface and rolled the silly inner tube along I could feel the texts going off on my iPhone. Later I discovered the messages were from church members at the game saying, "I see you!" and "Why is our Pastor on the ice?" and a few other delightful remarks! Whether in a pulpit or an area jumbo screen – people can recognize their faith leader. So, how could these disciples not recognize Jesus?

Well, a few years ago I was waiting in the basement of Union Station, Toronto where all the regional trains converge in the downtown of Canada's largest city. I was queued up in a long line and started chatting to a rather distinguished older looking gentleman beside me. We talked about the weather, the NHL playoffs and I was offering some tips on how the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team could have done better that year. We shuffled our bags along the dirty tiled floor as the train started to board continuing our hockey conversation. Finally, just before we were about to board the train I stopped and said to my conversation partner, "It's been lovely chatting with you. I feel like I just have to say – you look a lot like Gordie Howe." For those of you who are not hockey fans, Gordie Howe (AKA Mr. Hockey) was one of the finest players ever in the NHL. At that point, my conversation partner dropped his bag, put his hands on his hips and said, "I AM GORDIE HOWE." I felt so, so silly. Maybe it was a little like that for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They didn't recognize Jesus because they weren't expecting him and he looked different than they remembered. Resurrection can do that to a person.

Jesus, the stranger, asks them what they are talking about and Cleopas is astounded that this guy must be the only person leaving Jerusalem who has not heard about Jesus. Cleopas pours out his heart to this stranger sharing his deep, deep disappointment with how things turned out, essentially his disappointment with God. After all, this was not the way things were supposed to turn out.

I think Cleopas speaks for all of us when it comes to disappointment. As a pastor I have had the privilege of sitting with people in their highest moments of achievement and their darkest times of struggle. The disappointment that Cleopas speaks of, feeling betrayed by Jesus' promises, of the betrayal of his fellow disciples and ultimately the seeming defeat of Good Friday is also a confession of disappointment in God. Cleopas is not alone in this disappointment. He's just honest enough to speak for the rest of us.

It's funny, but I find it interesting that people are often more honest about their disappointments and failures in coffee shops with friends rather than with brothers and sisters in Christ in church. Each week I go to a local coffee shop, sit and read the news on my iPad and enjoy a skinny latte and eavesdrop on the conversations all around me. Eavesdropping is a missional, spiritual discipline to open up to what God is doing in other people's lives beyond the usual "churchy" conversations I usually find myself in. When listening carefully to the human narrative floating around the coffee shop, I hear everything from disappointment ranging from the trivial – couldn't find a good parking spot, to the profound – disappointment in self, in the confession of how short-tempered we are with children; disappointment in the mean-spirited behaviour of so-called friends; disappointed in the ever so gentle distancing of relationship between husband and wife. Disappointment not only in self or others but in God as

well – in the diagnosis of a dear friend, of prayers unanswered, in the injustice that is obvious in this world of abundance. Listening with a theological ear you hear doctrines on people’s lips like theodicy, soteriology, eschatology and more. Of course, the answers to these doctrinal questions often come with a folk theology that leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, it seems that ordinary, everyday North Americans are like Cleopas – also able to express disappointment in us, in others and in God.

And then, I love what happens next. Cleopas even tells this stranger that that very day the company of women visited the tomb and found it empty but he was disappointed since they did not see Jesus. *He says, while talking unknowingly to Jesus.* The “stranger” responds to Cleopas by pointing out how much he’s missed the mark and attempts to open their minds to what God is doing in the neighbourhood through a little pilgrimage bible study on the Emmaus Road.

As they near Emmaus, Jesus appears to turn away and continue on the road. The disciples must beg him to come in because the hour was late, the road would be dangerous. It seems a bit odd that Jesus would appear to peel off at this point and head on his way. It only makes sense if you stop and think about the last time you were out for dinner with friends. What happened when the bill arrived? Did you “fight” over it with the conversation going back and forth like this, “Here, let me get the bill,” to which your dining companions also offered to pay? In our contemporary social customs, it only seems right if there is a little exchange – a “tug of war” takes place over who will pay the bill. Finally one person gives up and the other pays the bill, right? Well, the social custom of Jesus’ day was that you had to appear to be turning down the offer of hospitality. As a stranger you might say, “No thank you I’ll be just fine.” To which the host insists, “No, you must come and stay with us tonight.” “Well, alright,” replies the stranger. And so, Jesus enters the home in Emmaus but as soon as he is through the door, the social custom wears off. Jesus oddly takes the place at the table as host, sits down in order to break and bless the bread. As a reader we almost instinctively feel our lips move as if we are celebrating The Lord’s Supper repeating the Eucharist language “This is my body, given for you.” It’s only then, in the breaking of bread, of this first post-resurrection Communion service – do this in remembrance of me – that Jesus is recognized.

The disciples’ disappointment transforms into discovery as they come to terms with the astonishing truth and power of the resurrection. Their heartache turns to heartburn saying to one another, “Weren’t our hearts on fire when Jesus was walking along with us and we didn’t even know it?” They rush back to Jerusalem throwing caution to the wind with no fear of travelling at night, the power and light of the resurrected Lord is enough to lead them, almost like the Lord once went before the people of Israel a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night...