



Easter 3  
April 25, 2004

Luke 24:13-35

**The Road to Emmaus:**

1. The Stranger Along the Way  
M. Craig Barnes

In some ways it has been a hard week for us: Seven days ago a woman in our community was dragged out of church and killed by a man who claimed to love her. A man in our church experienced the death of his father this week. A woman lost her last remaining relative whom I buried yesterday. Two days ago we were all saddened to hear of the death of Pat Tillman, the young man who gave up a lucrative NFL contract to serve his country in Afghanistan where he lost his life. Of course, others who are less famous, but no less important, also lost their lives on battlefields this week. As did all of those killed by this week's suicide bombers. This week somebody in our church received bad news from a doctor, somebody heard deeply hurtful words from a person who had vowed to be loving, somebody's child got arrested for drugs. Maybe somebody sitting near you in worship.

But wasn't it just two weeks ago that we were saying, " 'Christ is risen!' 'He is risen indeed!' Everything is different." How is that? How does the resurrection change all these things that we have witnessed since Easter? The scriptures love to answer that question, and the story of what happened on the road to Emmaus is among the most exciting responses.

Immediately after depicting Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the gospel writer Luke shifts his scene to a road that leads to a city called Emmaus. Cleopas and another of Jesus' followers are on this road. Now, we don't know a thing about Emmaus. We don't even know where it was. Nor do we know why these two were going there. Maybe they were going home after watching their Lord die in Jerusalem. Maybe they were frightened in Jerusalem and just wanted to get out of town. We don't know. But the text does tell us exactly how far Emmaus was from Jerusalem. Seven miles. So apparently, the point of Emmaus is just that it's a place to go in getting away from disappointment.

Emmaus is where you go, when you have to get away because the person or the thing you were counting on has let you down. Maybe the road to Emmaus is the road back home, or the road to work, or a new job, or the church. It doesn't need to be far. Only about seven miles away from your last disappointment. We all spend a lot of time on this road.

Cleopas and his friend, who doesn't have a name, who could be any one of us, have become lost in their grief as they walk along. A third man comes up and begins to walk with them. We are told that this is Jesus, but the two men can't recognize him. The most striking thing about the appearances of the risen Lord is that he is so hard to recognize. Mary thought he was just a cemetery gardener. Peter thought he was just a man on the shore asking about fish. Cleopas thought he was just a stranger making idle conversation.

To this day, the risen hope of Jesus Christ still shows up as a stranger. Usually the stranger is unwelcome at first. His name may be failure - not someone you know well but he appears to say life is too short to collect trophies, and in that failure you find the freedom to enjoy life. Maybe the stranger is a disease, or grief over a loved one who died. At times you think you're going to be okay because you have made some distance on this grief, but then it strangely reappears out of the blue and you think your heart will break in two. Such a strange thing, this grief. I don't know how the stranger may first appear, but if it is the risen Jesus he won't appear the way you expected.

As they walked along Jesus asked the two men, "What are you discussing with each other?" The text says they just stood there, looking sad. Then Cleopas asked, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what happened? Jesus of Nazareth is dead." Jerusalem was a big town, and the chances are great that a lot of folks missed the death of Jesus completely. But grief works like that. When you have lost something or someone you cherished, it's absolutely infuriating that life can go on for others.

"Don't you know what has happened? Jesus is dead. He was mighty in word and deed. We had hoped he would restore Israel." We had hoped. We had hoped. Yes, we all have hopes for what Jesus was supposed to do. We had hoped that if we brought our child to church that she would grow up to be okay. We had hoped that if we prayed our marriage would change. We had hoped that if we finished college we would find a great job, or that if we sent all of those soldiers over there they would clean up the mess. We had hoped that Jesus would help.

The strangest thing of all about the risen Savior is that he will not save the day in the nick of time as we had hoped. No, Easter proclaims a hope that appears after the nick of time has come and gone.

Cleopas and his friend went on to tell Jesus that they had heard some unbelievable, confusing, stories from some women about an empty tomb who had this vision of angels telling them Jesus was alive. But then, looking at Jesus, they said none of us have seen him.

In response, the stranger said to the two men, "O how foolish you are." Which means Jesus did not go to the same seminary I did. We were taught to be more empathetic, good reflective listeners. ("What I hear you saying is ....") But when you need a new vision of hope, it is really quite foolish not to see it once the hope has been written down in the scriptures.

Jesus then reminded these two that even their own prophets never promised that the Messiah would restore their dreams. What the prophets promised was that the Messiah would first die. Then after our dreams for what he would do for us have also died, we can see him risen from the dead offering the strange new dreams that only come from heaven. First death, then life.

In addition to the scriptures, the Early Church also had a few legends that helped teach biblical doctrine. According to one of them, the devil once tried to get into heaven by pretending to be Christ. He took a company of demons with him dressed up like angels and together they went to the gates of heaven. The devil, who knows scripture, shouted, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in." At first the guards to the gates were thrilled thinking that their king had returned from the dead. With joy they shouted back their refrain from the psalm "Who is the King of Glory?" But then the devil made his fatal mistake. He flung wide his arms and said "I am." And in that act of arrogance he showed them his open palms. There were no scars from the nails and everyone knew this was not the King of Glory.

The only one who can open the gates of heaven still bears the wounds of his passion for us. And on this side of Holy Week we ought to know that our hope is not to avoid loss or even death. Our hope rises from the dead!

Just as Easter comes after Good Friday, so does your hope and the world's hope appear after we lose hope. That's the way the great biblical story goes. "Was it not necessary," Jesus said to Cleopas and us, "that the Messiah should suffer all these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all of the scriptures."

The role of scripture, even the parts about Moses is to draw us into the hopeful drama of Christ. This is why we come to church Sunday after Sunday in worship. It is why we teach the Bible to our children, and

youth, and we continue to study it as adults. Because as the Word of God is taught, the little stories of our lives are woven into the great story of God's salvation that began before you and will outlive you. In the words of St. Augustine, nothing worth doing can be accomplished in one lifetime. Our meaning to life is found not in what we do, but by our participation in the eternal work of what Jesus Christ is doing.

The great tragedy of so many lives today is that they are being lived without a great narrative. They have succumbed to the temptation to define their lives by our own experiences. But that inevitably means that life is defined by its disappointments. Yesterday at the worship conference in our sanctuary, Marva Dawn made the insightful claim that we live in a society whose very economy is dependent on our being disappointed in what we have and wanting more. You can't be satisfied, because then you are not going to be a good consumer. No, consuming assumes that you are disappointed which is why we keep consuming. And thus, disappointment defines a consumer.

What if your life were defined instead by the God who said "Let there be"? What if you took your place with Moses and the Hebrews whose disappointment at staring at the Red Sea was shattered by the parting of the waters? What if like Cleopas you take seriously the stranger who has joined you on the road of life? What if you had learned to join the Apostle Paul in saying that you have died with Christ in order to live with Christ? In other words, what if your life were formed by the Biblical drama?

Then you would no longer alternate between disappointment and consumption, living a little life that ends in a little death. Then you would have death-defying hope. And then you would be a person whose life was caught up in Christ's mission in this world.

But you have to know the scriptures. With so many hard weeks still ahead of us, it is foolish not to know where to find your hope. Amen.