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Luke 24:13-35
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On the Road Again

Have you ever felt like you just had to get away? Or felt like life had given you more than you could handle? Have you ever been deeply disappointed?

Can you remember a time when you did everything right and life still didn't work out the way you planned or wanted?

Have you grieved the death of a loved one, a dream, an identity, a future? Has your life ever been shattered? If so, then you know what it's like to be Cleopas and his companion.

It's Easter afternoon and the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem. Who can blame them?

Jerusalem is a place of pain, sorrow, and loss. It's a place of death, unmet expectations, and disappointment. It's a place where their lives were shattered.

No one wants to stay in that kind of a place. I sure don't, do you? As they walk they are talking about all the things that happened, and, I suspect, all the things that didn't happen.

It's so easy to imagine, those two characters striding down the Road to Emmaus that we can almost hear them talking about what happened.

And then a man joins them and asks them what was going on.

I can just see both men looking at him as if he had come from another planet. And then hear the first man as he explains to his new companion:

“It has been a crazy, crazy week in Jerusalem. Just a week ago there was an impromptu parade. It was an amazing moment.

“Many of us were gathered along the road and were buzzing with excitement. Riding up into the city on a donkey was a man who certainly was a prophet.

“Over the last several years, his reputation had grown and grown. The stuff he taught was truly inspiring and not like our boring rabbi’s teaching, right Cleo?

“He hung out with anyone ... even those who drank too much and who slept around.

“Cleo and I always enjoyed being with him as he would smile, laugh and ask such thoughtful questions.

“He could bring to light the truth of the Scriptures in ways that even baffled the temple leaders.

“On top of all that, this Jesus of Nazareth did so many extraordinary things. He helped some of our fisherman friends get their largest catch ever. He took a young boy’s sack lunch and multiplied it to feed thousands of people.

“He helped a paralyzed man walk again, and a blind man to see.

“And, get this: just a few weeks ago, we heard from Mary and Martha that their brother and one of Jesus’ own friends was brought back to life after having died four days before.

“Even though Jesus did so many amazing things and was such an amazing man of God, he and his influence apparently threatened our religious leaders.

“And so, our leaders handed him over to the Roman government for treason, as one who claimed to be a king.

“Jesus was sentenced to death and executed immediately after being sentenced. It all happened so quickly.

“Both Cleo and I had hoped that Jesus was the One—the Messiah—that has been promised for years and years to our Jewish ancestors.

“But our hope was dashed by his death, his murder, on Friday. Still, I got to tell you, there is something strange going on.

“A few of our friends went to the grave early this morning but didn’t find his body. Weird, huh?

“These women then came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.

“Then Peter and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, went to the grave as well and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.

Then the man who had just recently joined them on their walk toward the village, challenged them boldly:

“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

And then he interpreted for them prophecies from Moses and Isaiah and Daniel and Jeremiah and Micah (and others) that showed how the Messiah was to come ... live, die, and be resurrected ... and more.

Cleo and his friend listened intently to all that this very learned man was saying.

It was like he had inside information on how all of this stuff for the Messiah fit together. He had to be some sort of a rabbi or teacher they assumed.

This conversation carried on as they walked together. Soon they were approaching their village and it was getting to be late in the afternoon.

Cleo and his friend invited the man to have dinner with them.

It seemed like the teacher was heading further passed the village, but Cleo convinced him to join us finally by joking with him that “You gotta eat somewhere.”

The three strolled into the village of Emmaus and then up to Cleo’s house. Relieved from walking in the heat, they washed up from their journey and sat down to dinner.

At the table, Cleo said to the teacher, “Would you bless this meal in prayer for us?” and the teacher graciously did.

After they prayed the teacher picked up the basket of bread and started to pass it around the table.

Cleo and his friend were looking intently at the teacher and all of a sudden they recognized that the teacher actually looked JUST LIKE Jesus.

And as if a light went on in their head, they turned and looked at each other with excitement and said, "That's Jesus!" Looking back toward where the teacher was seated, they saw him no longer there.

They jumped up from the table and scurried around to find him.

They checked the house and then ran out to the street yelling his name trying to call him back to the table. Jesus was nowhere to be found! He had vanished!

"Cleo, that was Jesus! As we were walking side-by-side down the road, I guess I never looked at him very closely.

"I don't know how I didn't recognize him, but that was Him! Who else could explain the Scriptures like that!

"We've got to get back to the rest of the disciples in Jerusalem and tell them that we've seen Jesus!"

And they quickly headed back to Jerusalem to tell the others they had seen the resurrected Lord.

Wow! Can you imagine?

In your own life can you think of moments when things happen, when something pivotal happens and everyone seems to know about it? These are the "where were you moments" of life.

Those of you who are older will have been asked, "Where were you when you heard J.F.K. was shot!" (I was at walking between classes in 7th grade.)

Or, "Where were you on September 11th 2001, when the twin towers of the World Trade Center were hit with airplanes and came crashing down in that tragic terrorist attack?"

I remember watching the TV reports and seeing the first plane hit. I was in a Sacramento hotel getting ready to be interviewed by the Sacramento Presbytery's COM.

And when I met with them, that was all any of us could talk about.

So, if you and a friend were taking a walk after one of these monumental events and you were talking about the sheer magnitude of what had happened and someone joined you saying, "What are you talking about?"

I'm sure you'd be surprised too, I'm sure you'd think that they had been living under a rock if they knew nothing about it?

And then walking all that way without recognizing him? The text doesn't say that Jesus was in disguise.

Imagine having all the evidence of a risen Lord, his words, the words of the angels, and now you have the risen Lord standing right in front of you.

And you can't recognize him. You just stand there, staring at a stranger, looking sad.

Well, that's not so hard to imagine, is it? There are many of us who know what it's like.

We know what the Lord said about love, grace, forgiveness, and new life. We have the words of the angels. We have the story of new life.

We can dress up in Easter colors and sing "Christ is Alive!" But the brightness of the sanctuary and the scent of the Easter Lilies can fade a mile or two down the road.

Soon the Easter trumpet transitions into the car horn blasting at that crazy driver who cut in front of us.

We don't have to travel too many miles down the Easter road before we're caught in the traffic of this world, the hard realities of what we see and know.

We have friends who suffer and die. We are taken over by our worries and frustrations.

We get easily angered by time lost. Bitter about what is and what should have been.

Dreams of the perfect life, shattered. We just can't seem to put the pieces together.

"We had hoped that he was going to be the one to redeem Israel, to redeem us." We had such high hopes!"

How far do we get from Easter before we stop on the road and stare at one another and look so very sad?

Any stranger can recognize the hypocrisy between what we say we believe and how we actually live it out.

"Oh, how foolish you are," says the stranger, "and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"

I'm sure you've heard the story about the man who was caught in a storm and flood. He was approached by a sheriff department deputy who told him he had to evacuate immediately.

His reply was, "I am not worried, God is with me, and will save me if necessary."

The flood entered his house and he had to go to the roof. A neighbor came by in a small boat and offered him a ride.

Once again, he affirmed his faith in God and that if he needed to be rescued, God would do it.

Next a helicopter flew overhead and lowered a basket for the man to climb into. His response was the same.

Eventually, the waters overcame the man and he had nothing left to hold onto, and he drowned.

When he got to heaven, God was waiting for him, shaking his head in disbelief. "What are you doing here?" God asked, "You weren't supposed to be here yet?"

The man said to God, "I am a man of faith. I had faith that you were going to save me. What happened?"

God laughed, a great big laugh. "I sent you a sheriff's deputy, a row boat, and a helicopter. What more did you need?"

Even though his faith was strong, he did not recognize the Lord at work around him. How many times have you seen that in your life or someone else's?

The times when Jesus is fully walking the road, accompanying us, and we just don't recognize it for what it is.

Thank goodness, we know that there are others who will help us see him when we can't.

Even if we feel alone or isolated, even if we struggle to see Christ at work in our own lives, there are others who can help us see it.

As we travel along the road to Emmaus struggling with one another about what to make of it all, every once in a while, we met a stranger along the way who opens our eyes and we grasp a flicker of recognition.

And if you travel the road to Emmaus, you may meet Karen Armstrong. She's one of the world's authorities on religion who has written dozens of books on the religions of the world.

Armstrong insists that religion is not about believing thing. Religion is about behavior. Religion is about behaving differently.

And you can bet that our friends from Emmaus behaved differently after experiencing the risen Christ!

Armstrong tells the famous story of the great Rabbi Hillel the older contemporary teacher of Jesus.

A pagan came to the Rabbi Hillel and offered to convert to Judaism if the Rabbi could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg.

So, Hillel stood on one leg and said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study it.

"Go and study it, and in your studies, you must make it clear that every single word of the Torah is a commentary on the Golden Rule."

He went on to say that any interpretation of scripture which lead to hatred and disdain or contempt of other people, any people whatsoever was illegitimate.

St Augustine made exactly the same point, "Scripture," Augustine said, "Scripture teaches nothing but charity and we must not leave, any interpretation of scripture until we have found a compassionate interpretation of it."

For those of us who call ourselves Christian, recognizing Christ, recognizing the divine in the stranger is the pathway to justice, peace, and mercy.

The truth is. Jesus was in Jerusalem before Cleopas and his companion ever left. He was with them on the road to Emmaus. He was in the breaking of the bread.

And he was already in Jerusalem when they returned. Do you know what those intersections are called?

They are called the gifts of God for the people of God.

May we all experience these gifts as we trudge the road of happy destiny together.

And may we recognize the Christ in one another and then do something about it!

Amen