



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Time in Between

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Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? (Luke 24:13-18).

Cleopas and a friend are on the road from Jerusalem down to Emmaus, a couple hours' walk. Nobody knows that it's Easter yet, though in fact they're right in the middle of it. That's often how it is with God: even when God moves in a big way, we only tend to see it and understand in retrospect. For the moment, all these friends know is that rumors are swirling around a mystery.

The mystery is that some women set out early in the morning to anoint a precious body in a tomb, and they came back terrified, with a tale that the body was gone. The rumors started to fly immediately. People don't know what to make of mystery, so they often start conjuring up explanations long before they know many of the details. Lots of people value certainty over facts, and they latch on quickly to whatever calms their fears, whether it turns out to be true or not.

One rumor already circulating is that the women were just carried away with grief, and so they made a mistake.

They showed up at the wrong tomb, or something like that. But these are strong and sensible women, braver than most of the men who came nowhere near the cross on Friday. That kind of rumor says more about the desperate search for answers than about the credibility of the witnesses.

Another, more obvious and sensible, answer is that somebody came and stole the body. But who would do that? And what would be their motive? The disciples have been sad and sorry and scattered, overwhelmed with disappointment and afraid to show themselves in public, lest their master's fate fall upon them as well. They're as incredulous over this empty tomb as anyone else. Clearly they don't have the body. And the authorities? What would they have to gain by taking the body and hiding it? Nothing would suit their purposes more than to put this pretender's body on public display as a warning to anyone else inclined to stir up trouble. If the authorities have the body, it will turn up soon enough.

But the dead body never does turn up. What turns up instead is Jesus himself, alive and well. No one expects that, of course. Common sense and everyday experience tell them that dead bodies stay dead, so no one is looking for a risen Jesus. That's one reason why Cleopas and his friend have no idea who comes alongside them on the way to Emmaus. While they're pondering the morning's mystery, trying to make sense of it all, this man appears and wants to know what they're talking about. They stop, looking sad, and they ask him, "Are you the only stranger who doesn't know what's happened in Jerusalem these last few days?"

Later on, Cleopas can't tell this story without laughing at himself, and we should laugh too, since we know how it turns out. Can't you hear Cleopas telling the tale years later:

“And then I asked him, ‘Are you the only stranger who doesn’t know what’s been going on around here?’ I can’t believe I said that—to the only one who really *did* know what was going on!”

The story of Easter is a comedy after all, in the classic sense of the theater. Things turn out well in the end, surprisingly, unexpectedly, with a twist that no one saw coming in the two long days from Thursday night until Sunday morning. The time in between was terrible—which is why Cleopas’s question comes so full of cathartic laughter in the retelling of it, where joy bursts through what had been their darkest fears and deepest sadness.

So now, back on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend recount the weekend’s events with all the breathless urgency of breaking news, and Jesus just listens. Jesus does a lot of that, as he has ever since—listening as people go on and on about things they don’t really understand. Finally he says, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared! Wasn’t it necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” And then he interprets for them all the things the scriptures say about himself.

We’re all inclined to see the Bible, like the news and everything else in this world, through the lens of our own preconceptions and experiences, so we see what we expect to see and miss whatever we’re not expecting to find. But God is full of surprises, and so we often miss the message, the point that makes sense of the moment in light of God’s greater purpose.

Now the travelers arrive at the village of Emmaus and Jesus starts to walk on ahead, as if to leave them, still not

knowing who he is. But they call him back. “Stay with us. It’s almost evening,” they say. So Jesus stays for a little while, and they sit down to table together. Jesus takes some bread, and blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it to them. All of a sudden their eyes are opened and they recognize him. They know who he is; and then, just as suddenly, he’s gone. He just disappears. Cleopas and his friend say to one another, looking back on their walk together, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us? Didn’t we feel something moving inside while he interpreted the scriptures to us?”

Luke tells this story at great length, some years later when he writes his gospel, in part to give us an idea what it’s like to encounter Jesus along the way from one place to the next, in the time between some loss or anxiety we’ve already felt and the joy and peace that are yet to come.

First, Luke’s gospel reminds us that Jesus walks beside us, even for a very long time, before we ever recognize him. Our blindness is no proof of his absence. Our inability to see Jesus may say more about us than it says about him.

Then again, when we do recognize Jesus, it involves much more of a spiritual vision than a physical one. Facial recognition software would do us no good at all in identifying Jesus, since we have no idea what he looks like physically. He could be sitting right here among us and we wouldn’t know him to see him. But in an important sense that doesn’t really matter, because recognizing Jesus happens in a different way altogether. Recognition comes when something stirs inside us, when our hearts burn within us. It happens when his words ring true, when they make sense of our experience in light of the whole story of God’s salvation,

as we learn about it from the Bible and discover it for ourselves.

It's no coincidence that Cleopas and his friend recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace after all. Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," and he promises to be present in some mysterious but utterly real way, whenever two or three or more are gathered in his name. In the sacrament we recognize Jesus as the Word of God made flesh for us, the one who gave himself up to show the depth and breadth of God's love for us.

People have long pondered why Cleopas's friend has no name in this story of the road to Emmaus. Maybe one reason is so that we can fill in our own name. The gospel is like that. It invites us in. It lets us see our own story as part of God's greater story—the one about how Jesus comes to find us on whatever road we happen to be walking.

But the story doesn't end in this little village of Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend go rushing back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what happened to them. When they arrive, those in Jerusalem are already saying, "The Lord is risen, and he's appeared to Peter!" They compare their own experiences, and the stories line up, and against everyone's expectations it starts to sound as if it's true after all. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed.

And then, just when they're beginning to believe that something wonderful is happening, Jesus shows up again. "Peace be with you," he says. For the first time in a long while, there really is a deep peace among them, and within each one of them. And with that peace comes great joy too. So much joy, Luke says, that they almost can't believe it. It's

a funny thing about us humans, that we have expressions like “too good to be true”—as if we expect there to be some limit on the goodness and joy we might discover, when God wants to shower us with both.

The gospel says that’s what lies ahead for each of us: goodness and joy and peace beyond our imagining. For now, though, for this time in between the good news of Christ’s resurrection and the coming of his kingdom, we each have our road to walk. But the story of Emmaus reminds us that we don’t walk alone. We have this companion alongside us. Whether we recognize him or not, we walk this road with Jesus.



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