

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
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Sunday, April 22, 2012

**The Road We All Dread but Tread**  
Luke 24:13-35

This road is always crowded. It is busy. All the way from here to there. Crowded. But mostly people on this road walk it by themselves. Or in twos; sometimes threes; always surrounded by their own thoughts. Heads down. Shoulders hunched forward. Hands shoved into pockets. The vibes from these walkers shove you away saying "leave me alone." This road always crowded. We dread to walk it. But here we are.

Only a few of us have not traveled this road. We all shall, in time. It's a road of broken dreams. Broken hearts. Broken lives. I have traveled it. And seen some of you on it. We have passed coming and going. We have hurriedly glanced at one another. But we have not stopped. Or talked. Brokenness is not something to talk about briefly. It takes a while to surface in conversations.

**"On the first day of the week,"** the day we now call Easter, "two (of us) were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem ..."

Emmaus? Where is Emmaus? It is everywhere that is nowhere: a bar around the corner just off Trade Street; a bench down Tyron, a path in the park, an all-night restaurant, empty church on any evening, cocktail party, noisy DVD, iPod, Smartphone. Emmaus is where we go when there is nowhere else really to go. Emmaus is whatever we do when there is nothing left to do any longer. Emmaus is just "seven miles away" when seven thousand would still not be far enough away. The poet got it right:

You neglect and belittle the desert.  
The desert is not remote in southern tropics.  
The desert is not only around the corner.  
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you.  
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

- T. S. Eliot

(And perhaps in your heart as well.)

Emmaus is the desert that slips into the human heart filling it with the sand of sadness, the grit of grief and the dirt of despair. But most of all, Emmaus is the **"third day since it happened"** kind of place. The first day is filled with shock as we stumble through a fog of denial. The second day is egg shells, inane polite sounding and well-meaning words from friends and family. None of which need to be said, just endured. But "the third day since it happened" is the day you realize that the sun will continue to come up, people will go to work or on about their affairs, come home and get ready to do it all over again, and again "world without end Amen." And you and I will make our way slowly to Emmaus because - well, because it is seven miles away and we have nowhere else to go.

"The third day since it happened," we finally begin to talk as we walk. The phrases tumble from our mouths: "We'll get over it." - "It'll be better later." - "It's probably for the best." - "Nothing lasts forever." - "We'll be stronger for having gone through this." - "Someday we'll understand." And the dust of the desert road sticks in our throats, coats our lips. And we don't believe a word of it.

We don't believe it - because "**we had hoped.**" We trusted. We really believed. We had hoped things would be different. We had hoped Iraq would be over. Afghanistan too. Syria. Wall Street greed. Petty politics and partisan politicians. We had hoped the economy would balance by now. We hoped our son or daughter would overcome addiction, that politicians would be women and men of honest, law-abiding characters. We have hoped - oh, we had hoped so very much - and trusted that our world and all who dwell therein would be redeemed and become a community of peace. "My God, I am tired of praying for peace – peace among nations, peace in our communities, peace in our homes, peace of mind."

Yes, it is the third day since it happened - or is it over 2000 years since it happened? It is the third day since it happened multiplied by over 700 other days since it happened. And very little seems changed.

And still - even today and in every "third day since it happened" - he comes, the Stranger comes and interrupts us; he approaches and asks his bothersome irritating question. "**What are you talking about?**" he asks. We talk about what we have always talked about: our desert wanderings, our sense of loss, our loneliness and our hopes. We grieve. Of course, we grieve. But we grieve our sense of loss more than the one we have lost. That is the double-cross of Death and Dying. We grieve our sense of loss, our hurt and pain, our loneliness and outrage more than the one we have lost - at least at first. And our eyes are kept from recognizing the identity of the Stranger because we are just not looking for him! We are so firmly focused upon ourselves.

Even asking the Stranger to stay with us as evening begins to fall seems a bit selfish, but we found a certain degree of comfort as he told us the "old, old story." Our request is so familiar: Stay with me awhile. Sit with us, can you? **Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.**"

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens;  
Lord with me abide!  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless,  
O abide with me.

The darkness begins to clear a bit; the road of broken dreams recedes into the background as the Stranger quietly assumes the role of host rather than that of guest and breaks the bread. Is it the characteristic way he handles the bread? Or the familiar words? Isn't it enough to say simply that we do not always recognize the Resurrected Stranger because we do not expect to see him or sense his presence with us? We are not looking for him. The last time we saw him he was hanging on a cross, broken and dead. Of course we do not recognize him.

Luke's story of the Road to Emmaus is a summation or condensation of several decades of the history of the first century Christian movement, and an indication of the way we have always experienced Jesus. The risen Jesus is known in the sharing of bread. The risen Jesus journeys with us, whether we know it or not. There are moments in which we do come to know him and recognize him .... Emmaus always happens. Emmaus happens again and again - this is **truth as parabolic narrative** (paraphrased from Borg/Crossan, *The Last Week*, p 201). Jesus' resurrection is the demonstration of the Kingdom of God on earth, which is uniquely the extension of neighborliness, the creation of community, the harmony of hospitality.

T. S. Eliot captures the truth again.

What life have you, if not life together?  
There is no life that is not in community,

And no community not lived in praise of God.

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,  
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor  
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance,  
But all dash to and from in motor cars,  
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.

...

And the wind shall say: "here were decent godless people:  
Their only monument the asphalt road  
And a thousand lost golf balls."

When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?  
What will you answer? "We all dwell together  
To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?"

Oh, my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger.  
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

- T. S. Eliot

The Resurrected Christ is all about extending the neighborliness described as the Kingdom of God to all people. And he is there when it is happening and he is also there when it is not happening.

John Steinbeck created a scene in *Grapes of Wrath* which has always reflected Luke's reporting of the ways in which Jesus appears as the Resurrecting One. Tom and his mother are saying goodbye. Tom is hunted by the police for going against the owners of the migrant workers' camp.

They sat silent in the coal-black cave of vines. Ma said, "How'm I gonna know 'bout you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn't know. They might hurt ya. How'm I gonna know?"

Tom laughed uneasily, "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one – an' then –"

"Then what, Tom?"

"Then it don' matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be everywhere – wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. ...Why I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they built – why, I'll be there. See?"

Yes, I think Steinbeck's Tom is very Jesus-like. And I believe we can see Jesus wherever wars are fought and young men and women die to satisfy politician's egos and lies, and wherever governments – State or Federal – can't seem to keep themselves out of people's bedrooms or their choice of consenting and covenanted relationships, and wherever people deny community to those who are different from the majority. And Jesus is there when the more than 1,200 community health centers, which serve millions of mostly poor people, continue to fall far short on key measures such as vaccinating children and helping diabetics control blood sugar; and the majority of those poorly performing community health centers are in

our South. And I believe we can see Jesus and sense his presence with us whenever we need someone to abide with us along the roads of disappointment and grief.

God grant that our eyes may be opened and that we recognize him treading this dreaded road with us and all others. For we cannot make this trip alone.

Amen.