

“On the Way”

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Luke 24: 13-35

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The post-Easter stories in the Bible are wonderful stories, as the followers of Jesus are trying to come to terms with what has happened. We get all Hallalujah-y – Christ-is-Risen-with-several-exclamation-marks-y on Easter Sunday morning, but the move to celebration wasn't at all instantaneous for the followers of Jesus on that first Easter. They were freaked out and unsure. It was only after several encounters and experiences with the Risen Christ that they were convinced and changed, and so go out and make a change.

The story we read today takes place later on that first Easter Sunday. Two followers of Jesus are walking to the nearby village of Emmaus. At this point the experience of the brutal Crucifixion of Jesus is fresh and they are still processing that reality; and then added to that are strange rumours of people seeing Jesus alive.

One of the followers on the road was Cleopas. Who was Cleopas? I have no idea. He doesn't appear before this scripture and we never hear of him after this story. And the other guy? He doesn't even get named in the story. These two are disciples or followers of Jesus but they are not part of the chosen 12; they are two of the many nameless, no one has ever heard of, followers of Jesus. I kind of like that. I like it because it makes it easier for us to enter into the story.

After his resurrection, Jesus appears first to 'insignificant' people, like women. But these two are another good example. Not only are they nobodies in the eyes of the world, they are nobodies in the Jesus movement. We don't know anything about these two guys walking to Emmaus except that they were close enough to Jesus to be very troubled by the events of the last few days.

Why does Jesus appear and walk with these two nobodies? I don't know, except that God likes to appear to nobodies and to work through them. God likes to hide treasure in ordinary, unassuming clay jars like Cleopas and his friend, like you and me.

The town of Emmaus is 7 miles (or 11 kms) away, about a 2-hour walk. As they walk, a stranger comes along side of them. When I hear this passage, I think of places I've visited where walking is still the primary mode of transportation for most people: places like Zambia and Kenya. It

would be a bit weird if you were walking along King St. talking about some news event and someone just joined the conversation and started walking with you; but in a culture where all sorts of people are walking it's very natural. Actually, I experienced that when I walked the Camino in Spain (exactly 10 years ago!). It is easy to catch up to someone on the road and then as you fall in step with them you naturally just start talking and walking together until someone stops for a coffee or for the night and you go your separate ways.



It was really an amazing thing — sometimes I'd end up walking with someone and I'd have these incredibly deep and rich conversations, and I'd look forward to seeing them on the road the next day or at some point on the journey to Santiago, because that's where we were all headed. Still, sometimes you would walk with

someone for a part of the journey and then never see them again.

It was just so natural and magical to walk with strangers and to really connect for a very short part of the journey. I suppose it happens to each of us in different ways, encountering people for a short time. Honour and give thanks for those relationships. They are a gift. But don't cling to them, because some relationships are for a short and precious time. I suppose if you think about it, every one of our relationships is for a limited time on the journey of life: some last longer and some are incredibly brief. We shouldn't take any of them for granted. I just want you to think of those little encounters you have that are small and fleeting gems on the journey.

Back to our Emmaus story. *We* know the stranger is no stranger, but *they don't* --which is odd. How could they not recognize someone they were so upset about losing? Even odder is the fact that the stranger starts teaching them. He opens up the scriptures for them as they walk and shows them through the scriptures how all that had happened in the last few days had to happen ... and they still don't recognize him! It is only later when they urge him to stay with them at the end of the day and he breaks bread that they recognize him.

How often are we in the presence of Jesus and we completely miss it? One of our biggest tasks as followers of Jesus is to learn to see God working in our lives and to learn to hear the master's voice. That's why we do the segment called "God Sightings" every week at Celebrate Life. The

Lord is very near to you now, but he is so easy to miss for all sorts of reasons.

Do you know how if you read scripture regularly a verse will jump out at you that you never really noticed before? (That by the way is one of the ways Jesus speaks to us!) One verse that jumped out at me not too long ago and is still speaking to me is part of the 'Parable of the Sower'. Jesus tells the story of the Sower, the farmer, who sows seed on different kinds of soil and finally sows it on good soil where it ends up taking root and growing into an abundant harvest. The verse that jumped out at me is from **Mark 4:18-19** "***Still others like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desire for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.***"

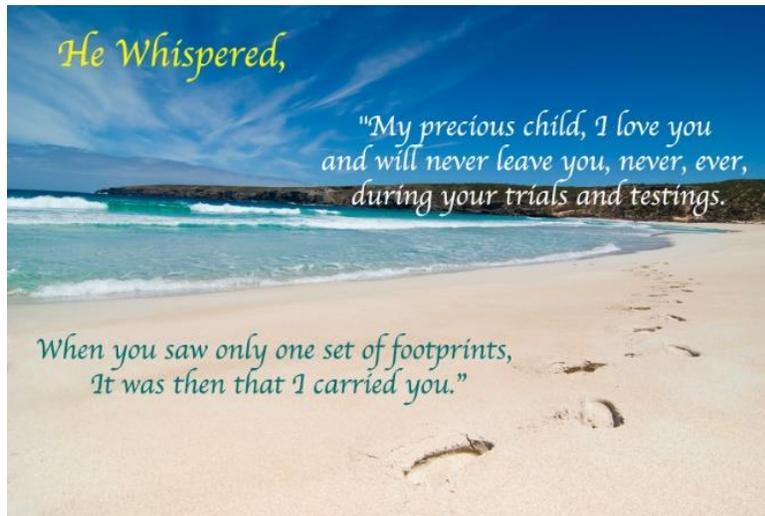
In other words, there are things in our lives that can block us from recognizing Jesus walking beside us, and that can block us from having a deep and transforming relationship with Jesus: the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things. So there may be some things that you can do to unblock that relationship. Spend time each day in some kind of devotion or prayer/scripture reading time. During that time, picture your worries and hand them over to the Lord to carry. When it comes to the deceitfulness of wealth, the only cure I know for that is to give. And finally, I do think that seeking forgiveness does a huge amount to bring us closer into God's presence.

What I want to ask you to think about is this — what is blocking your relationship with Jesus? Is there one change you could make that would make a difference? Maybe Jesus walked with numerous others and they just never recognized him. Wouldn't that really suck to miss an encounter like that?

There may be something you can do to make it more likely to experience Christ's presence, but there may not be. Sometimes it is just hard to feel God's presence. When Cleopas and his friend walked to Emmaus, they were in shock and grief after the brutal death of their master. I think one of the saddest phrases of this scripture is when they said to the stranger Jesus... "*But we had hoped...*". "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel." They were grieving a huge loss. What things have you hoped for that didn't end up happening? "But we had hoped she would get better... but we had hoped to have children... but we had hoped he would beat this addiction... but we had hoped we could stay in our own home longer... but we had hoped things would be different." Grief and loss are so much a part of our lives. There is no detour around it and there is no

quick way through it. Sometimes when you are grieving a person or a situation focusing on *what could have been*, it is hard to see *what is*.

Go easy on yourself. You don't have to be the perfect Christian: you just have to keep walking and try to know with your head, even if you can't quite see with your eyes, that you are not alone on this journey. One day, by the grace of God, you will look back and your eyes will be open and you will marvel at what you see.



The Footprints poem illustrates that grief walk so beautifully, where the man has a dream where he sees his whole life as an image of walking in the sand with the Lord. But he is troubled when he looks back over his life and sees that during his most difficult times, there is only one set of footprints.

He assumes he was abandoned during those difficult times and can't understand it. But the Lord opens his eyes to see those footprints differently: "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

The final thing that I want you to notice about this story is that when it comes to being aware of Christ's presence, it's not enough to study the scriptures or to be a student of Christianity. These two had the best teacher and they still didn't get it. They came close. At the end of the day when their eyes are opened and they looked back they said "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*" (Luke 24:32) They had the information, but it wasn't until they put their faith into practice that their eyes were opened and they truly experienced the presence of the risen Christ.

When they reach Emmaus, the stranger is about to walk on, but they urge him to stay with them. You need to remember that in that time and place it was not safe to be out at night. There were no streetlights. There was no good policing. Nighttime was when the thieves and bandits were out in force. In the Bible, hospitality is one of the highest virtues, and denying hospitality one of the greatest sins. Those two welcomed in a

stranger and invited him to share their food — and *that* is when their eyes are opened.

Isn't that the truth? Don't you find that you experience the presence of Christ most when you are serving or visiting or in some way making the load a little lighter for someone else? It's not just a duty of the Church to reach out and make a difference—*reaching out and making a difference is how we become the church*. We become most fully the church and we experience Christ's presence most fully when we open our doors to Refugees, when we walk in the Pride parade, when we serve a Sunday Supper, when we call someone who can't get out of the house because of illness or depression, when we advocate for someone who has been treated unjustly. And that presence—that relationship changes us.

I have the address for the United Church in Humboldt, SK. In the wake of the tragedy of the Junior A hockey team that was hit by a transport truck killing 15 young men including the driver, their coach, assistant coach and 2 young radio announcers, and injuring many others, I thought we could sign and send them a card. I have been praying for the survivors, the families, the community; but also the churches. I'm praying for the churches because those churches will need to step up even in their grief, to be the presence of Christ for a community that has been rocked by this senseless tragedy. It is a tiny speck-of-sand kind of gesture but I thought that the United Church in Humboldt might find some strength in knowing that a United Church in Brockville is holding them in prayer.

When the two in Emmaus recognize that Jesus is present with them, they are changed. How do I know they are changed? The 12 are still locked in the upper room terrified that they will be next to be arrested and killed. There is a lot of fear after the crucifixion. But as soon as Cleopas and the other disciple recognize Jesus, they immediately race back to Jerusalem. Before they wouldn't consider travel at night — but now the darkness cannot stop them from sharing the incredible news!

It was in doing these three things: walking with a stranger on the road, listening to the scriptures, and showing hospitality and compassion to the stranger, that their eyes are opened. All of a sudden they knew that their Jesus was alive. All of a sudden these two nobodies, in the eyes of the world, knew that they mattered to God. They also knew that though things would not go back to the way they used to be; that because Jesus lived, they could face whatever uncertainties lay ahead.

It was in these encounters that the lost and confused, hurting, nobody followers of Jesus came to life, and became the Church. May we continue to be the living Church of Jesus. Thanks be to God.