

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Sermon for April 6, 2014
Exod. 17: 1-7; Luke 24: 13-16; 28-29
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Bless these words, Lord Christ, and make them yours. Amen.

Where's Your Emmaus?

Emmaus, Emmaus. We have been hearing a lot about Emmaus this Lent, but do we know where it was located? Its size? What it was known for? Especially, why the two disciples, Cleopas and his friend, were going there? No one knows for sure where Emmaus was located because it has been a lost city for centuries. Some scholars say it was seven miles from Jerusalem; others say twenty miles. Three other possible sites lie closer to Jerusalem, but there is no consensus as to which if any of these was the site of Emmaus. Yet there is little question that Emmaus, mentioned only once in all of scripture, existed.

As many times as we've now read this scripture passage, we still haven't found out why these two people were going there, wherever it was. As I mentioned earlier in this sermon series, all the other disciples hunkered down in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, afraid to be seen. Yet these two ventured out of the city in broad daylight. Why?

Maybe they lived in Emmaus. Maybe their jobs were there. Maybe they simply wanted to get away from the despair and sadness, and Emmaus was close enough to walk to, yet far enough from danger. Maybe they intended to go beyond Emmaus, and the village was a stop-over point. Most likely, though, they were "getting out of Dodge." Fearful that the fate of Jesus – put to death by the Roman authorities – would be their fate as well, they left. That is the most compelling reason for the flight to Emmaus – the terrifying fear that they, too, would be killed.

Frederick Buechner, a prolific Presbyterian spiritual writer, novelist, and preacher, wrote that Emmaus "is the place we go to in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, 'Let the whole thing hang. It makes no difference anyway.' . . . Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. . . . Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred" (as qtd in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX). In other words, Emmaus is that place we go to when we are most disillusioned or most want simply to forget. It is a 'safe house' – an anonymous place where we can hide from the crushing reality of our lost hope.

And biblical scholars do agree on one thing: these two disciples had lost hope. The person that they thought was the Messiah had been killed. Instead of the Messiah

ousting the authorities – both Roman and Jewish – the authorities had ousted the Messiah. Oh, those best laid plans of mice and men. How often they don't pan out.

Plans weren't exactly panning out for the Hebrews, either, wandering around in the desert of Sin, and as we are told, "traveling from place to place." They, too, were disillusioned because the journey wasn't, perhaps, as easy or as quick as they assumed it would be. Surely, they had suffered enough in Egypt to deserve some comfort; surely, they had been faithful to God, but comfort in the desert was far from what they received. They were thirsty, they were hungry, they were impatient, they were threatening, and they wondered where in the world their God had gone, not so unlike our two disciples. "Is the Lord among us or not?" they demanded.

Is the Lord among us or not? If we are truthful, we've most likely asked that same question at some time. When faced with hardship and pain, we aren't so different from the Hebrews or our two companions on the road. There are times when we escape to the security of our own Emmaus because we feel threatened by a cancer diagnosis, divorce papers, wounded children, a broken friendship, the aging process, or just the current state of this very broken world. We travel down our personal roads, reluctant to look back, or to face what is, desperate to get to that place where we can, for a time, bury our heads in the sand.

Other times we escape to Emmaus because nothing inside of us seems to make sense any more. The God who seemed so close and caring is now silent or absent or confusing. We've been good, faithful people, but those promises in scripture don't seem to be meant for us. We get sick. Our loved ones die. We lose a job. Our souls become hardened or weary. All we want is for life to go back to the way it used to be, when it made sense.

Emmaus also stands for all the places where we are stuck in the past as surely as those two disciples were. Maybe we keep replaying a past offense over and over again, one which we committed, or one someone committed against us. Or perhaps we remain mired in guilt for an action that God forgave years and years ago but that we cannot. Or we can't shake the old records that tell us we aren't good enough, we aren't smart enough, we aren't pretty or handsome enough, we aren't talented enough. We become so stuck in looking back that, like the disciples, we don't recognize Jesus either when he appears on the road with us.

Like the disciples and the wandering Hebrews, we often can't see the possibility that God can and is doing something new in Jesus because we aren't looking at the present moment. "Don't you know everything that happened in Jerusalem these days?" these two travelers asked the stranger. Because they certainly do. In fact, those past few days are all they know. They saw Jesus die. They saw him buried. And it is too much for their hearts to bear. "We had hoped" are words of dejection spoken by people who

have given up on the future because they are stuck in that unfulfilled past. “We had hoped.”

The same is true of the Hebrews. “Why can’t we go back to Egypt? It was better there.” Really? Better to be slaves instead of people on the challenging road to freedom? But they can’t see God anywhere, either, because they are too stuck in their past, and it seems like too much effort to press ahead. But Jesus never promised the journey would be easy. He did, though, promise it would bring joy.

The problem with all this walking, however, is that neither the disciples or the Hebrews got rid of their problems. Going to Emmaus did not change the fact for the disciples that Jesus had died. Even as they left Jerusalem behind, they still argued, reasoned, and discussed what had happened, with no apparent answers. Even as the Hebrews left Egypt behind, they still demanded more and more proof that God would provide. Maybe we’ve ended up in our respective Emmas only to discover that nothing has changed – the situation is still the same. And maybe that’s what is so important about this story – that **Emmaus isn’t the place where the circumstances change; it is the place where we change.**

We change through the struggle of disbelief, worry, and transitions in life when we open ourselves to the presence of Christ walking along with us. We change when we do not give up or go back, but keep on walking because there is the promise of joy on the other side. We change when we rest in the scriptures and stories like this one, and hold to the promises that are there for us, too – maybe not as quickly as we’d like them to come or in the way we expect them to come – but promises nevertheless from a God who does not lie. We change when we lay down those heavy crosses of our own making – our lack of forgiveness, our jealousies, our need for control, our self-righteousness, our selfishness. We change when, instead of making this journey on our own and counting on our own self-reliance, we invite our Lord to journey with us.

Maybe in the end that is the biggest blessing of being on the road to Emmaus – not to avoid whatever hardships we want to run from, but to be changed in order to live through them. If these two disciples had not been on the road to their Emmaus, they would not have then been able to experience the risen Christ, as we will see on Easter. If the Hebrew people had not wandered in the desert and faced hardships, they would not have witnessed God, standing in front of the rock at Horeb.

Jesus can come to us in many guises – as a friend, a spouse, a teacher, a preacher, a counselor. Perhaps he comes in the singing of the birds, the bubbling of a mountain brook, or the splashing of fish in a pond. He certainly comes to us in spirit during worship and in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper where we receive his living presence.

The situation may not change, but we change as we come to realize that we do not travel alone, that the Lord is with us. The good news of Emmaus is that wherever we go, Christ goes with us, and wherever we are headed, Christ is already there, waiting.

Thanks be to God.