

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

I mentioned last week that our family had driven down as far as North Carolina during the school vacation week after Easter. When we go on a long trip like that, we try to do it with as few stops as possible. When we do stop, we do it kind of like we are on the NASCAR circuit. We pull in, jump out, do what we have to do, try not to take too long or spend too much, and continue on the road again. Our way of looking at a rest stop is similar to how some people view going to worship. For some folks, worshipping God resembles pulling into a rest area on the highway of life. You pull in, do what you have to do, hope it doesn't take too long, try not to spend too much, and continue on your journey as quickly as you can.

When we were heading south from the Washington DC area on Monday of that week, Jill, Greg, and I got caught in a horrible traffic jam. It was just crawling; no end in sight and it was getting toward dinner time so I said: "This is crazy. We can sit in this going nowhere or get off, have a nice dinner somewhere and see what it's like after that." So we managed to get off, went to a Cracker Barrel for dinner, had a good and relaxing meal, and when we returned to the road, we all felt better. Not only that but we drove over 95 first to see how bad it was before committing to getting on, saw it was still bad, so we just kept going, got on Route 1 south, which had virtually no traffic, and had a lovely drive going through small towns and past the US Marine Corps center at Quantico, VA and thinking about friends of ours who spent time there and having a good time as we traveled. Worship should be more like that experience than a NASCAR pit stop – a break from the stress of the road of life, a chance to relax, feed and nurture our soul and our relationships, and perhaps to go forward with a new outlook and aware of new paths we hadn't noticed before.

Today's Gospel is about people on a journey. It begins with two disciples walking, slowly, dejectedly, hopelessly from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday. One of them is named **Cleopas** (klay-oh-puhs), who is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament although a *Clopas* is referenced in John 19:25, where it says that "Mary, the wife of *Clopas*" was one of the women at the cross. We don't know whether this is referring to the same person or not.

¹³ Now **on that same day** two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^f from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “*What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?*” They stood still, looking sad.^g ¹⁸ **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?*” ¹⁹ He asked them, “*What things?*” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^h **who was** a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders **handed him over to be condemned to death** and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one **to redeem Israel**.ⁱ Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!* ²⁶ *Was it not necessary that the Messiah^j should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “*Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.*” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “*Were not our hearts burning within us^k while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*” ³³ **That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem**; and they found the eleven and their

f Gk *sixty stadia*; other ancient authorities read *a hundred sixty stadia*

g Other ancient authorities read *walk along, looking sad?*”

h Other ancient authorities read *Jesus the Nazorean*

i Or *to set Israel free*

j Or *the Christ*

k Other ancient authorities lack *within us*

companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, “*The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!*” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

In Luke’s Gospel all the resurrection stories happen “on the same day.” Scholars argue about the exact location of Emmaus which had a Roman garrison, was it seven miles away to the northwest, was it 20 miles to the east. The symbolic significance of moving toward Emmaus is that moving toward Emmaus is a movement away from Jerusalem and Jesus - these disciples are deserters. They are walking away from Jerusalem and Jesus and toward Roman power.

In Luke’s gospel avoiding Jerusalem is avoiding the true path of Jesus. The whole Gospel of Luke is a journey **toward** Jerusalem, the revealing of Jesus’ identity takes place in Jerusalem, the story of Jesus ends in Jerusalem. In the book of Acts of the gospel will go **forward** from Jerusalem to the world. In walking away from Jerusalem and toward Emmaus the disciples are abandoning Jesus and his teaching and mission.

While this passage is often called, “The Road to Emmaus,” maybe a better title is, “*The Road Back to Faith*” because that is what it is about. It is about how we find our way back to faith when our faith and obedience are wavering.

Taking the road back to Jerusalem after Passover, after the crucifixion of Jesus, is like swimming upstream. It is not the direction most people are moving in. Before Cleopas and his companion change direction and return to the city, something must happen to turn them around.

What happens to them gives hope to those of us who are feeling confused, lost, bewildered, anxious, afraid, or just plain empty inside. What happens is that Jesus, unrecognized, comes alongside them and travels with them in their pain, hurt, and loss. In our own lives, we also encounter times like Cleopas when we are confused and despairing; when we need the help or guidance of a friend, mentor, or coach to instruct us, refresh our spirits and get us moving back in the right direction on the road of faith.

While Cleopas and the other disciples are talking about everything that has happened to Jesus and trying to make sense of it all, the risen Christ draws near and walks with them. Luke says their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Their inability to recognize Jesus is evidently not because they don’t know what he looks like (although it is interesting that even though the early church thought Jesus was the most important

person who ever lived, there is no physical description of Jesus in the New Testament). Their failure to recognize Jesus at this moment is because they are spiritually blind.

The unknown traveler asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" (You see in the days before DVD's, iPods, and stereos you actually had to talk with other people when you were traveling). They stood still looking sad. We are never given the name of Cleopas' companion, perhaps because we are the second traveler. We are being asked to journey from an understanding of the death of Jesus that causes sadness to a deeper understanding of his death that brings joy. Perhaps this is a story about the temptation we all face in the face of suffering and death to want to escape to a more secure place.

Cleopas' question is deeply ironic, "*Are you the only one who travels in Jerusalem and does not know **the things** that happened in it in these days?*"

The irony is Jesus is the only one who does know what happened to him in Jerusalem and what it means! Cleopas has no idea what has happened, he has all of the facts and none of the meaning. Not only that, he calls Jesus a "stranger" in Jerusalem. In one sense Jesus is a stranger because the ruling elite does not recognize him and he is crucified outside the city walls. In another sense, Jesus is the truest son of Jerusalem, Luke tells us in chapter 2 that Jesus is most at home in his father's house, the Temple, where his parents found him when he stay behind in the city when he was 12 years old.

Jesus asks, "what things?" and invites Cleopas to tell him what happened to him in Jerusalem. They said to him, "*The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...*"

This is true as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough. Jesus **was** a prophet, but more importantly he **is** the Son of God. What happened to Jesus was not just the murder of one more prophet like John the Baptist. Their description of Jesus runs the risk of reducing Jesus to a reputation in the past. They are not remembering him correctly.

"And how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him."

They remember Jesus as a victim. The chief priests and rulers did something to him, as if Jesus had no active choice or part in his death on the cross. They remember him as a passive recipient of the condemnation of others.

"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

They remember him as a nationalistic Messiah. But Jesus was not sent only to Israel. He was sent through Israel to all people of every nation. Now we know they are sad because their hopes have been dashed, however, what they hoped for was not what Jesus was sent for. His mission and their expectations were not in sync. This is still a common problem for disciples of Jesus. Our expectations and understanding of Jesus are often not broad enough, deep enough, or open enough to include all the mystery and paradox that is Jesus. We don't know who he truly is. The disciples are sad because they thought Jesus would redeem Israel. He has done exactly that only they don't see it, recognize it, or understand it. They are baffled by what has taken place.

Cleopas and the other disciple have trouble recognizing Jesus in part because they have misunderstood him. They have remembered him as a reputation, a victim, and a failure. They have all of the facts and none of the meaning. When we only think of Jesus as a reputation, a victim, and a failure who died and that was it, then like Cleopas, "him we will not see."

Jesus doesn't appreciate how they have remembered him and he calls them foolish, which is a strong term because the Bible states that the fool says in his heart there is no God. The foolish person interprets life without considering the spiritual dimension. Cleopas has interpreted Jesus only in social and political terms; he has neglected the spiritual dimension. Jesus also says they are "slow of heart." In biblical spirituality the heart is connected to the eyes. When our heart burns or is on fire spiritually it is seen in the eyes. When we are not in touch with our deepest center (the heart); we cannot see the events of life from a spiritual perspective.

So Jesus treats these two to a personal tour of the scriptures. What is a little frustrating is Luke tells us that Jesus told them, but he doesn't tell us what Jesus told them. Cleopas and his companion are close to their destination, they are ready to stop and eat and relax, but Jesus appears to be traveling farther. Jesus is always prepared to go farther than we are. However, once he is asked to stay, he immediately agrees because when we invite Jesus to stay with us it shows openness to him, even when we are confused, or fleeing from the tough problems of life. It is around supper time and we are not surprised that Jesus repeats what he did at the supper before he suffered. The act of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving bread after Jesus has reinterpreted the scriptures for them is understood by Cleopas and the other disciple. Their eyes are opened and they recognize him. They could see him because their hearts, their spiritual centers were awakened and they could see the world of the spirit. Jesus opened the

scriptures so they could see things they hadn't seen before. It is only on the level of the Spirit that the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus can be understood. This understanding takes place on a journey, as we attempt to follow Jesus, to walk with him, and try not to be afraid.

Jesus is the one who can help us to find meaning in the midst of our confusion. He can make our hearts burn with spiritual fire and give us eyes to see the truth. As Jesus walks and talks with Cleopas and the other disciple, their confusion turns to clarity and their despair to joy. The hope for us in Cleopas' story is that we also can experience a companionship with Jesus that will guide us in difficult times. Luke says, "That same hour **they rose up and returned to Jerusalem.**" "They rose up," means that the disciples who had been spiritually dead now share in the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection is not just an event in the life of Jesus. It is an event in the life of his followers. The risen Jesus has done his job. He has brought his followers to a deeper experience of himself and taught them to see and remember him for who he truly is – the Son of God. What they had seen as the end of hope was in truth its beginning.

Cleopas and his companion had been so sad and confused as they journeyed away from Jerusalem and Jesus, are changed. They get back on the road to Jerusalem, back toward the mission and the witness to which they are called. With the long and eager strides of those who have good news, they take the road back to Jerusalem to tell others of their life changing experience with Jesus. This is what disciples do. We share with others the good news of our experiences with Jesus on the road of life. How Jesus walks with us and stays with us even when we are disobedient, running away, confused, and spiritually blind. How Jesus teaches us the meaning of the scriptures, helping us to understand them and giving us spiritual sight. How Jesus is known among friends through the breaking and sharing of bread. Their excitement moves them naturally to share their story with the brothers and sisters who are in the midst of a similar state of despair and confusion. If we are confused or despairing, if we need a guide to help us, instruct us, or renew our spirit and get us moving in the right direction on the journey of life, then we need to invite Jesus to journey with us. Jesus will never take us where we are not supposed to go. The good news is, if we ask Jesus to walk with us and stay with us, he gladly will.

Prayer

Gracious God, we come with open hearts, our true selves revealed.

We are needy, sinful, weak and in desperate need of a Savior.

Pour on us your grace, comfort and mercy.

Remove confusion and discouragement and open our eyes to truth.

Give us courage to let go of feelings and the power that we give them to lead us away from you.

Help us to embrace all that will grow our dependence on your Divine presence.

Guide and lead us, Blessed Jesus on the road back to faith.

Reference:

Emmaus (eh-may-uhs; Heb., 'warm wells'), a town of disputed location that figures in the postresurrection story of Luke 24:13-35. Most manuscripts place it about seven miles (sixty *stadia*) from Jerusalem, but others and the ancient Palestinian tradition prefer about twenty miles (160 *stadia*). A town named Emmaus stood at the latter distance in the Valley of Ajalon in the time of the Maccabees (1 Macc. 3:40, 57; 4:1-15), where Judas defeated Gorgias. Bacchides, a Syrian general, later fortified the site (1 Macc. 9:50). A Roman villa, two Byzantine churches and a baptistry, and a Crusader church have been excavated there. Other sites closer to the shorter distance that have been identified with Emmaus since Crusader times are Abu-Ghosh, Qaloniyyeh, and Motsa west of Jerusalem, as well as el-Qubeibeh to its northwest. None of these sites, however, has any ancient literary attestation of the name of Emmaus. Anyone familiar with Palestinian bedouin or Arabs in a pre-automotive culture would not doubt the disciples' ability to walk forty miles in a day. C.H.M¹

Heb. Hebrew

C.H.M. Charles H. Miller, S.T.D.; Professor of Theology; St. Mary's University; San Antonio, Texas

¹Achtemeier, P. J., Harper and Row, P., and Society of Biblical Literature. 1985.

Harper's Bible dictionary. Includes index. (1st ed.). Harper and Row: San Francisco