

The Walk to Emmaus
(Mt 16.12—13)

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 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.¹

^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*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

What Would You Talk to Him About?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 24:13-35*

A warm spring day in ancient Jerusalem was a glorious thing. The rainy season was over. The skies were deep blue. The landscape was sunlit. The summer heat had not yet arrived. The temperatures ranged in that comfortable spread of the sixties and seventies. It was a perfect day for a walk, that day that Cleopas and the other disciple set out to go from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

This story, so old and memorable, is as comfortable as a favorite shirt or bouse. It feels right. It's almost a part of us. And so it's a little curious that we know so little of the facts in this story. Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, or sixty stadia in the ancient units. But if you were take a string and anchor it in Jerusalem and then stretch it out seven miles, and then sweep out a full circle with Jerusalem at the center of this seven mile radius, you would find no ancient town called Emmaus. Scholars and archaeologists have tried to identify Emmaus, but without any success.

Then, we have two disciples. We know next to nothing about them either. Cleopas was not one of the twelve. He's not named anywhere else in the Gospels. And his companion that day was not even given a name in the story.

We have a largely anonymous pair of disciples walking away from Jerusalem to a town equally unknown. Maybe we should conclude that Luke failed Journalism 101. I mean, it's pretty elementary: who, what, when, where. Every good news article contains this basic information. But Luke misses quite a bit of it. He gives us just one out of two names, and nothing about the one he names. And Luke is equally poor at giving us the where. We know they start in Jerusalem, but that's about it. The who and the where are basically missing. Luke gives us just the what and when of the story. It is the third day after Jesus died, and they are leaving Jerusalem mulling over Jesus' death and their great disappointment in how things turned out.

So, are we to conclude that Luke gets a 50 on his essay? Decent on the What and when and pretty terrible on the who and where? Or maybe, instead, we should take a look at why Luke set the story up the way he did. What we discover, then, is that Luke has created a masterpiece, not a failed newspaper article. For at the end of the day, the story isn't principally about two disciples two thousand years ago, nor is it about the town to which they were going. The story that Luke tells is a story into which every reader of it is invited. The who is you and me when we read it. The where is here, wherever the reader is. Luke invites you and me to walk down the road, the road we take when we want a break, when we want to get away from it all, when we want to mull over the stress and strain and disappointment. Luke invites you and me to walk down the road and to allow ourselves to be joined by Jesus, to allow ourselves to enter into a conversation with Jesus, and to see what transpires when we do.

So it's our story, and it's our walk. But I have to admit, after a long New England

winter, I like the basic climate and weather of the original. So, in my mind's eye I'll start us at 75 degrees, brilliantly sunny, just the hint of a breeze. Let's go for a walk.

The weather is splendid. Just perfect for a walk. And you are walking down a quiet country road. The breeze cools your sun-splashed arms just perfectly. It lightly ruffles the leaves in the low shrubbery alongside the road. The road underfoot is gravel, but green blades of tenacious grass claim the places that the wheels and footsteps of the travelers miss.

For a bit the perfect weather and the near silence capture your attention, and you are grateful for them. For they take your mind off other things. But soon enough your mind turns to other matters. The things you bring with you, the things that made going for a walk today a good idea, the things you need to mull over become a stream of thoughts and internal conversations.

What's on your mind today? As you walk down the road, what occupies your thoughts?

- What worries are you mulling over today?
 - Your health
 - Your children
 - Your work
 - Your finances
 - Your failures
 - Your regrets

Jesus has come up along side you. Go ahead, talk to Jesus about what's worrying you.

- What fears, doubts and anxieties are troubling you today?
 - Facing your mortality
 - That you can't keep keeping things together
 - That you're not up to the tasks ahead of you
 - That our country or our world is going in a frightful direction
 - That you will be left alone

Go ahead, talk to Jesus about what is frightening you, or causing you doubt, or making you anxious.

- What angers have come with you on your walk today?
 - That you have been misunderstood
 - That you have been hurt or betrayed by another person
 - That you have tried so hard but things still don't turn out right
 - That you are not listened to
 - That life isn't fair

Go ahead, talk to Jesus about what's making you angry today.

- What disappointments do you carry with you today?
 - That your hopes and dreams have not materialized
 - That you feel like a failure
 - That someone you've depended on has let you down
 - That happiness has eluded you
 - That you are not the person you wanted yourself to be
 - That you've prayed and asked for God's help, and nothing's changed

- That something isn't working the way it's supposed to
Go ahead, talk to Jesus about what's disappointing you today.

Jesus joined the two disciples as they walked along the road. They told him of their disappointments, of their dashed hopes, of their loneliness and their sense of abandonment and of their desolation. They poured their story out to him, and he listened. Nelle Morton coined the lovely phrase of hearing another to speech. She means that we trust the other person enough to speak our whole story and truth when we feel listened to. Jesus listened the two on the road to speech, and I hope perhaps he has listened you to speech this morning, as well.

But Jesus did not only listen to them, but after he did, he taught them, as well. Jesus says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe" It may sound a little risky for Jesus to have come down quite so hard on these two disciples who had just bared their souls to him. I imagine, though, he said it with love in his voice. Not, "Oh, how foolish you are," but, "Oh, how foolish you are." In his voice they would have read his great love for them and his desire that they not continue in such pain.

But Jesus knew that if they were not to continue in such pain, they would need to learn to see the world differently. He invited them to see another way. As they listened, they would learn to see that some of things they expected, like that by following Jesus they would have all material things and power that they wanted, were actually the source of their unhappiness. They would learn that when they focused on the things that really mattered, many of their fears and disappointments and angers would evaporate. They would learn they no longer needed to be held hostage things that didn't really matter. They would learn that many of the things that made them angry made them angry because they let the wrong things get to them. They would learn to find life and hope where before they had found only death and despair.

And so now, continue your conversation on the road today with Jesus. But now listen to him. What do you hear him say about your worries, fears doubts and anxieties? What do you hear him say about your angers and your disappointments? What way to life does he offer to you?

The story ends with that scene so familiar to us from our celebration of holy communion. They are walking along together. They arrived at Emmaus, the village to which they had originally headed. Jesus walked ahead as if he was going on. But the two disciples strongly urged him to stay with them. He did. They shared a meal together. And when he blessed and broke the bread, they realized who he was.

There are so many levels of meaning in the ending of this story, which is one of the things that makes it so great. This morning I want to focus on just one. The disciples had left Jerusalem in despair. Jesus joined them on the road, and he helped them pour their hearts out to him. But he also lovingly corrected and guided them. When night fell and they came Emmaus, an extraordinary shift had taken place. Until then the story was about the two disciples, their pain and their education. Suddenly the focus moves in the other direction. The two disciples offer Jesus hospitality rather than let him go on his way into the night. The focus moves from receiving to giving. In a sense we can say that the two disciples had already become healed enough that they were no longer drowned in their own sorrow and disappointment and all those other things that submerged them. They could open their embrace to their travel companion and

offer him food and lodging. And that opened the way for the ultimate gift that Jesus was to give them. They offered him dinner. But when he took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them, the veil between the ordinary and the holy became a fully porous membrane. It was an ordinary loaf of bread, just like the one Sally makes for us each communion. But in the back and forth play of hurt and listening, instruction and taking instruction, receiving and giving, and then reversing the receiving and giving, in the back and forth play, in the fully developed relationship between Jesus and the two disciples, the simple meal became what it always is if we but see it. The simple meal became the banquet of life.

So, then, there is but one last part of our walk today. Invite Jesus to stay for dinner. Say the words to him. Say, "Jesus I want you to come to dinner tonight." Say, "Jesus, I want you to sit at the table with me." Say, "Jesus, I want to break bread with you tonight." Say, "Jesus, I want you to open my eyes and my heart tonight." Say, "Jesus, I want to get it right tonight." Say, "Jesus, I'm ready for a great banquet tonight." Say, "Jesus, I am ready to live tonight."

Yes, Jesus. Here we are. We're ready to live today. We're ready to leave the despair and fear behind today. We're ready. Amen. Amen. Amen. And thank you for walking with us on the road today. Amen.