

Finding Jesus at the Table
Based on Luke 24:13-39
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The story of the Road to Emmaus is that of the disappointed followers leaving Jerusalem, because the leader whom they followed is dead. They're headed for Emmaus. Why? Do they have friends there? Jobs? As far as the gospel of Luke is concerned, the important thing about Emmaus is that it isn't Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, the scene of the crime. The capitol city. If things were going to change for the better, as far as the disciples were concerned, the change would have started there. They had gone to Jerusalem following Jesus, expecting him to begin the kingdom of God right there at the temple. But instead, Jesus was arrested, beaten, and crucified. So ended their dreams of change. Game over. This could not have been the Messiah; they must have been mistaken. Time to go back to their fields and their small businesses, their fishing boats and their nets, time to go back to the way things have always been and try to forget the great dream that has just died.

So they are walking away, grieving, and even willing to share their grief with a total stranger who joins them on the way. *We had hopes*, they say to this willing listener walking with them, *we were disappointed, now we're lost*. They only realize much later that the stranger companion to whom they pour out their grief is Jesus, their friend and teacher, the very person for whom they are grieving.

This is one place in the Bible, not by any means the only place, where we see the truth of those hymns—he walks with me and he talks with me; Just a Closer Walk with Thee. The truth of the metaphor: *faith journey*, or *the Way*, for the Christian life. Jesus literally meets the disciples on the road, and walks with them, even while they're going the wrong way.

He doesn't have to do that. In other gospels, in other places in this gospel, he simply appears, in Jerusalem. No extended interpretations of scripture necessary. They see him and they believe in the resurrection. But these

guys are not in Jerusalem. They're turning their backs on all that, closing the chapter. Jesus could just let them go, but he doesn't.

He comes alongside them, asks them what's going on, listens to their disappointment. He doesn't beat them over the head for their lack of faith. He literally meets them where they are. He walks with them and teaches them and stops where they stop and eats with them, until, as the bread is being broken, they realize that it's Jesus, that he's been raised from the dead.

Along the way, once he has heard their story, he does urge them to think about it a different way. He interprets the whole scripture to them, from Genesis through all the prophets. And they listen. Later they remember that they listened with burning hearts, as though they recognized the truth in what he was saying, and it spoke to something deep in them. But even that burning feeling, even Jesus' own wisdom laid out for them, it wasn't enough to make them turn back. What the stranger has to say is interesting—fascinating even—but they keep on walking away from their hopes, they keep on in the certainty of their disappointment and disbelief.

They keep on, that is, until they see Jesus in the face of this stranger. They keep on walking away, until they see for themselves that Christ is risen, and is here breaking bread with them. All that talk, Jesus' own teaching, does not reveal to them who this stranger is. They only come to recognize him when he breaks the bread. There's something about Jesus' hands on the bread that is like a veil dropped on his identity. He breaks the bread for them, and they see—*this is our Lord*.

Maybe it is the fact that he, the stranger and in some ways their guest, has become the host. They beg him to stay with them, they remind him that it's late, they invite him to share their bread and the place where they are staying. But when they sit down to eat, he is the one saying the blessing, he is the one breaking and sharing the bread. He's the one providing for them, not the other way around. And somehow that reversal is what opens their eyes, maybe.

Or maybe it is Jesus' willingness to walk alongside them, letting them go the way they were going, that comes to fruition when he breaks bread with them.

I was once part of a book club that didn't always have time to read books. A bunch of clergy and academic women who had way too much to read already. So sometimes we would gather to watch videos and talk about them. It was with them that I first watched an episode of the PBS series *America Reframed*, called "Radical Grace." It is a powerful documentary about the work of American nuns, with and without the support of the Vatican.

The nun in the film who stole our hearts was Sister Jean Hughes. You see her managing a classroom full of young and not so young adults, working with them to get their high school equivalency. You see her listening to the guilt of a man who murdered his friend, telling him, "it's good that you carry this burden, that you know this act was wrong--this is God working in you." And you see, after she dies of lung disease, some of those same, tough ex-cons and high school dropouts, crying like babies with their grief at losing her.

But along the way, Sister Jean tells the interviewer, "To have someone come to me and say, 'thank you for being there for me.' And I think to myself, 'you have no idea what *you* do for *me*.'" She continues, "I mean, they actually help me maintain some sense that there is universal goodness."

Sister Jean invited the highschool dropouts and the former drug addicts and the ex-cons to the table, she did her best to be one person in their lives who truly loved them. But she found at that table that she herself was being fed, that the ones she came to love were loving her. That's where we find the presence of Jesus. When the hospitality we offer reverses on us, when we reach out to a need with enough real love and genuine humility that we are able not only to serve but to be served, then we can feel Jesus' presence and see Jesus' face.

It turns out there are many stories in the Bible of the stranger who turns out to be God, or the stranger who turns out to be Jesus. The story from Luke of the road to Emmaus is a familiar one, a beloved one. It is well known and beloved because we feel its powerful truth, that there are moments in our lives when we are able to recognize Jesus in the face of the stranger. We recognize the truth that Jesus is willing to walk with us even when we're going the wrong way, that he meets us where we are, and transforms that place. We recognize the truth that sometimes we find Jesus exactly in the midst of our grief at losing him. Just as we are focused on venting our

disappointment and even our anger, we find in the person who listens to our venting, the presence of God. We recognize the truth that sometimes it is in welcoming a stranger to be fed at our table that we ourselves are fed. And we recognize the truth, which ought to color our every human interaction, the truth that sometimes, as the whole Bible teaches us, sometimes the stranger is God. Amen.