

The Road from Emmaus

By
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from the pulpit of
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1 John 3:1-3

³See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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, 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. 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 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 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.

Before Tom Long distinguished himself as a preaching professor at Princeton Seminary and Emory's Candler School of Theology, he began accumulating tales from southern Presbyterian church life. He grew up in Georgia and South Carolina and has a treasury of stories that expose the truth of the gospel in ordinary encounters at the intersection of life and faith.

Tom remembers that day when even fairly small towns had their own newspapers, and they published local stories of interest as well as the big headlines that populated the covers of newspapers everywhere. He recalls a story about the small-town pastor named Clint Tidwell. One of Tidwell's blessings – and curses – was that the local newspaper was owned and edited by one of his church members. The blessing part was that this old journalist thought Tidwell was one of the finest preachers around, and he wanted the whole community to benefit from his pastor's homiletical wisdom. So every Monday morning, he would publish a summary of Tidwell's sermon in the paper. The curse part was that though the newspaper man was well-meaning, he was also a bit eccentric, and Tidwell was often astonished to read the synopses of his sermons as interpreted by his church member, the editor.

One year, on the Monday after Easter, Tidwell made his usual early morning walk down the driveway to pick up the paper. He could see from a distance that there was a huge headline in bold print. Tidwell wondered what big thing had happened overnight – had a war erupted somewhere? Was there a cancer cure just discovered? Had a local bank failed? When he leaned over and picked up the paper he was startled to read the headline in bold: *Tidwell Claims Jesus Rose from the Dead.*

On that day after Easter, standing in his driveway, a red flush crept up his neck. Of course he had claimed in yesterday's sermon that Christ was raised from the dead, but gosh, was that headline news? he thought...I mean you're supposed to say that on Easter, aren't you, that Christ rose from the dead, but that's not like saying that some person

who died last week had risen from the grave, is it? As he looked at the screaming headline, what had been a routine Easter sermon suddenly had Tidwell feeling rather foolish.¹

Foolish... That's exactly the word Jesus uses to describe the two on the Road to Emmaus:

²⁵*He said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"*

My guess is a number of us – who come back to worship during these weeks after Easter, are like this couple on the Emmaus Road, still needing some help to interpret the big claims we made back on Easter. If under the umbrella of *foolishness* we find definitions such as *nonsensical, irrational, folly, and absurd*, then there is something *foolish* about the claims we make on Easter. The gospel accounts themselves are less than clear testimony to the resurrection. The first sign is not a presence, but an emptiness – a tomb found vacated and a body gone missing. Some disciples see and believe, and others leave needing more proof. In Luke's gospel, the women who discover the tomb empty come away preaching the first Easter sermon, but to the men their words seemed *an idle tale and they did not believe them*. There IS no gospel expectation that our trusting the power of resurrection can show up fully formed on the High Holy Day of Easter.

Here at Bryn Mawr, we might think that the case, given the crowds from sunrise to noon. In addition, some of you may not know that we routinely have several hundred people watch our weekly services online. This year, on Easter Sunday we had well over a thousand people who tuned in to worship with us on Livestream. We can't beat Easter Sunday for its splendor: the brass and the full choir leading us to new heights of praise, the Halleluiah Chorus, singing together *Jesus Christ is Risen*

¹ Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p.86.

Today, the children in their Easter finest, and the beauty and lovely smell of the sanctuary filled with lilies and spring flowers. All of it bolsters the Big Day when we claim Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But if we leave it at that, and let all that Easter hype fade like the flower of the field, then we, like pastor Tidwell, ought to find ourselves feeling kind of foolish.

If the claim we make on Easter is that Jesus was raised from the dead, we cannot simply return to life as usual. The good news of this gospel story is that we are given a bit of time to let the experience of resurrection sink in, to discover the weight of the world's despair lifted, and to allow the power of the Living Christ empower us.

These disciples who encounter the Risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus help us in this way: They meet us where many of us find ourselves in some liminal state between confusion and certainty of belief. They join us when we feel the need to ache over the brutality of crucifixion, including the brutal violence we are seeing escalate today. And they join us to ponder the rumors of resurrection. They give us permission to confront the distress for all that is wrong with the world. And they remind us that sometimes Christ is right beside us and yet we cannot see or perceive it.

Then, amid our uncertainty and wonderment, they help us know what to do. When they come to that moment of recognition, when they glimpse the presence of God in their midst, when they recognize that they are actually in the company of Jesus, they instruct us on how to respond to the news of resurrection. The text says, ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; 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.*

They make a U-turn, you see, and they run – even in the dangerous nightfall – they run back to Jerusalem. They return to the place of political unrest, to the people suffering under inequitable systems of power and violence and oppression. The ones who had been overcome with despair now run with joy and hope. The ones who had been incredulous, now proclaim good news in awe and wonder. The ones who once put the world’s chaos at their backs -- now return, themselves changed, risen, empowered to live the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Don’t you see? The usual way to describe this story is to call it “The Road to Emmaus,” but it is much better named “The Road From Emmaus.” Once the Risen Christ is recognized we return to all that is broken and death-dealing and feels hopeless with the good work of Christ to do. You remember from Jesus’ very first sermon what this work entails: To bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the Lord’s favor. This is the foolish, God-given work we are called to do on the Road from Emmaus.

This past Monday, many of us donned our little solar eclipse glasses and found a spot to watch in awe and wonder. Some of you traveled to see the full eclipse, most of us stayed and enjoyed seeing the mere curve of the moon cut across the sun’s face, and felt the temperature drop and sunlight dim. Wherever we were, I hope all of us found ourselves part of some unifying human experience. That itself is a wonder at this moment in time. There was another, earlier solar eclipse in Philadelphia, the story goes. I don’t remember all of the historical details, but last week I recalled it and found this story about the early founding of this country when there was far less scientific understanding of what was happening.

Back in the late 18th Century, there was actually a solar eclipse during a meeting of the Continental Congress. As the sky got unexpectedly darker during the day, there was panic, for some people thought it meant the end of the world and someone moved that the meeting be adjourned.

Another member of the Congress spoke against the motion saying: “If it is not the end of the world, and we adjourn, we will appear foolish. If it is the end of the world then I would prefer that the Lord finds us going about the work that we have been given to do. I move, therefore, that candles be brought.”²

Friends, in this season of Eastertide, we need not fear being foolish. We need only be fools for Christ, to be on the lookout for God’s living presence which comes up alongside us, leading us back down that Road From Emmaus, and giving us good work to do.

AMEN.

² Recounted in sermons by Mary Jane Cornell and Ted Wardlaw, citation uncertain.