

This morning we encounter one of the most dramatic readings in the whole New Testament from Luke 24.

- Rembrandt loved this story so much that he painted it four different times.
- I once had graduate school professor who said that if he only had three scripture texts to take with him to a deserted island, this would surely be on the list.

Let's hear the text, and then I invite you to keep your Bible open to the text during the sermon.

The Word of the Lord from Luke 24.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles 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.

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, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Surprise of the Easter Jesus

Some of life's best experiences are moments of new insight. Lightbulb moments. Moments where we gain a whole new way to see the world.

Some of you here this morning might have a little brother or sister who is just learning to talk. One day all they can do is babble. And then, just like that, they learn how to point and say "ice cream!"

Some of you here this morning can probably remember when you went to kindergarten or 1st grade. You knew your letters, but you couldn't make sense of all those words on the pages of your favorite book. And then, one day, something clicked and you could begin to read.

Some of you probably remember your first week in algebra class. You had no idea why anyone would want to do math with letters. But after a while (and it often takes a while!) a lightbulb goes on. Pretty soon you're doing math with barely any numbers at all.

Lightbulb moments happen at church, too. A pastor in Ohio once decided to teach his congregation about worship by putting little arrows in the bulletin's order of worship: little upward arrows by all the prayers to remind us that we are talking to God, and little downward arrows by all the scripture readings to remind us that God is talking to us. After church that Sunday, one older gentleman, who had noticed that for most of the service the arrows went back and back forth like a conversation, told the pastor "I've been in

this church 80 years, and finally have this worship stuff figured out."

Today's narrative is about one of the most remarkable lightbulb moments in the Bible. Two disciples begin their journey depressed and confused. But they end up running right back to Jerusalem to announce the news that they had seen the risen Lord.

Luke tells the story in a way that lets us in on the secret—Jesus is right there with them all along. So the drama for us is not necessarily that they have this lightbulb moment, but rather the utterly unexpected way it comes about. It's so surprising that it challenges even the way that even lifelong Christians think and pray.

Disillusionment

The text's drama is heightened by where it starts, with the Emmaus journeyers "**standing still, looking sad.**" (vs. 17) They were close followers of Jesus who probably celebrated his triumphal entry just a week before. Now Jesus is dead, and all Jesus' promises seem empty. It all adds up to a potent mix of grief and betrayal. . . . Think of the congregation in Kansas that woke up one day two months ago to the news that its council President was quite possibly one the nation's worst serial killers. . . . This begins to get at the level of confusion that our two main characters were facing. Their words in vs. 21 "**we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel**" describe this despair. "Had hoped" means that the hope is gone. This is "hope in the past tense."

It is this candor that draws us in. This is the story about those who are sympathetic to Jesus' message, but whose lives are in limbo because of the apparent failure of God's promises. It is about those of us who quite can't get our minds around the Easter message. It's about 2 people on the road to Emmaus and all those in the 2000 years since whose hope is "past tense hope." It's about all of us who have ever longed for a spiritual lightbulb moment.

Now as we reflect on this text, it's tempting to keep our eyes on these two disciples, to figure out how they made their journey from disillusionment to hope and faith. But the text puts the spotlight on Jesus. It is Jesus' actions that give us surprising clues about these lightbulb moments work. Let's trace them. .

Jesus Comes Near

Jesus' first action is simple, but profound: **"Jesus came near and went with them . . ."** (vs. 15) It's an unremarkable sentence until we remember its context—just 10 verses after a cosmos-changing resurrection. No sooner has Jesus risen again and he is out on a dusty road, out to find these two disciples. Back in chapter 9, Luke tells us that Jesus had "set his face toward Jerusalem." The whole book is about a pilgrimage. Now we know that Jesus' pilgrimage doesn't stop on Good Friday. After Easter Jesus is on the road again. That's what our risen Lord is like. Jesus, the pursuer. Jesus on the move.

And on the move in ordinary places.

As Frederick Buechner noted about this text, you'd have expected a little more fanfare here on Easter Sunday: a ticker-tape parade, an inaugural ball, even an angel choir filling the sky with "The Hallelujah Chorus." But instead, Jesus is pursuing two sad pilgrims on a dusty road to a little village no one knows much about. (per Buechner) Jesus doesn't arrive here from on high, in a "blaze of unearthly light." He comes in the middle of all their questions. It all seems so unglamorous.

Back at the beginning of Luke, Jesus life began in ordinariness, in a cowstall in Bethlehem. In the middle of Luke, Jesus' journeyed to an out of the way synagogue on the Sabbath where he healed anonymous bystanders. Now, as we come to the climax of the Easter story, we find that Jesus' habit of working small, ordinary places continues. It's a habit that perfectly suits even the resurrected Jesus. The Emmaus Road story tells us that even after Easter God chooses work in ordinary ways—and that what is at work in the ordinary circumstances of our lives may be nothing less than God.

Jesus Rebukes

Then (vs. 25) Jesus rebukes: **"How foolish, how slow of heart you are. . ."** To be honest, this a part of the story no one paints. Jesus calls them 'foolish' and 'slow of heart'—forms of address that don't strike us as especially polite. This is certainly not a sentimental Jesus in an exercise of comforting handholding. . .

But remember: the rebuke is not about what their favorite restaurant was or what style of clothing they like. The

rebuke addresses how these disciples are seeing the world and perceiving God's plan. It challenges their political assumptions about Jesus—assumptions which turn out to wildly underestimate the kind of revolution he is ready to inspire.

This is the kind of rebuke that is, to use the words of the book of Proverbs, “as good as gold” (25:12). If I have poorly invested all my entire retirement savings, blessed is the financial advisor who tells me so bluntly. If I am wasting my high school years chasing experiences that dull my pain, but never satisfy my deepest longings, blessed is the teacher or coach who tells me the truth. And if I am running my life on the basis of assumptions about God that are dead-end streets, praise God for the pastor or elder or parent who has the guts to say so. And so it was here.

Jesus Teaches

Importantly, that rebuke is only the beginning. Jesus follows it with an Old Testament Bible Study (**vs. 26**), walking the two through “**Moses and all the prophets**—the entire Bible at the time. Just as Jesus had done in his hometown synagogue and just as Philip will do a few years later with an Ethiopian seeker, Jesus directs their attention to the Old Testament.

It's a curious method for Jesus to use. Hours after rising from the dead, Jesus could have used a much more dramatic method to open their eyes. An angel choir could have appeared with repeat performance of “Glory to God in the Highest.” He could have offered a dramatic travelogue of his

three day journey from death to life. Instead, his method involves a seven-mile walk and a mini-course on the Bible. It's patient, time-consuming work.

And it points to the power and trustworthiness of scripture. Can you imagine a heartier affirmation of the incomparable value of the Old Testament? Jesus here points to the significance of the Old Testament and even tells us here that the best way to read it is through the lens of Good Friday and Easter. It's a method that tells us that Jesus' death and resurrection wasn't a kind of divine trump card meant to undermine the message of the O.T. Rather, Jesus death and resurrection fit the plan from “before the foundations of the world” (Eph.).

This is why for 2000 years, followers of Jesus have taken their cue from Emmaus and learned to cherish the Old Testament. This is why many churches have Bible readings from each testament each week. It's why Christian schools and religious publishers work so hard on curricula based on the Old Testament. It's why Calvin Seminary has a course in “Christ-centered preaching from the Old Testament.”

Jesus at Fellowship

So Jesus' method is companionship, rebuke, and instruction. But it all remains incomplete until it is summed up at table fellowship, in this surreal meal scene that Rembrandt loved to paint. **Vs.29 they urge him, “stay with us.”** Jesus agrees. And surprisingly, he takes charge, becoming the host, (vs. 30), **taking bread, blessing bread, breaking bread, giving bread to them.**

It's then that the lightbulb moment happens. **Vs. 31. "They recognized him."** Jesus, the risen Lord. It's an "Amazing Grace" moment. They once were blind, but now they see. It's even better than learning to talk or to read.

What exactly prompted their recognition? Was it hearing his voice repeat a familiar table blessing? Was it seeing his nail-scarred hands hold up the loaf? Was it seeing his well-practiced hospitality and remembering his feeding of the 5000 or his Last Supper? The text never tells us.

What the text does tell us is the most important thing of all: this eye-opening came as a gift. It's signaled in this strange passive voice: **"Their eyes were opened."** (vs. 31). As Fleming Rutledge points out, every time you see this kind of passive verb in the Bible, you know that God is at work.

It's a theme that runs right through scripture. Back in the Old Testament, Elijah's servant's "eyes were opened" (passive voice). Ahead in book of Acts, Cornelius, Lydia, and Paul himself all had faith given to them as a gift.

Human eyes and ears can respond to physical sensations, but they can't generate spiritual perception. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: "no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God." John Calvin called it the "inner illumination" of the Holy Spirit, and made it one of the main themes in his theology. The point is that we can't produce this illumination from brilliant thinking or even intense prayer. It comes as a gift. We don't have the burden of

generating spiritual insight. What we have is the privilege of receiving it.

And so, this Emmaus narrative crystallizes one of the church's foundational doctrines, the doctrine of revelation. God's revelation to us

- Is finally not merely about abstract ideas, but a divine Person, the risen Christ.
- It does not stand over against scripture, but rather emerges as we encounter scripture.
- Is not a human accomplishment, but rather a gift from God. As the Belgic Confession concludes, it is the "Holy Spirit who testifies in our hearts" (not "we who generate spiritual insight.")

And it's a narrative that crystallizes the church's teaching on the mysterious relationship of divine and human work in faith.

- The disciples are the ones questioning and pondering, all right.
- But it is Jesus who finds them, rebukes them, teaches them, and hosts them.
- The disciples are the ones who invited Jesus to supper with the prayer "stay with us"
- But true spiritual insight is a gift. God is at work, clearing our eyes to see the truth.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul turns these insights into one of the most beautiful affirmations of the entire New Testament:

"For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge

of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

The last sentence gives us the take-home message: “the power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Emmaus Today

It’s a pattern of divine activity that hasn’t stopped. For writer Annie Lamott, Emmaus Road happened in a dark hotel room. As she tells it in her book *Travelling Mercies*, neither abortion or alcoholism, neither divorce or promiscuity could get in the way of the patient pursuit of Jesus.

For philosopher Anthony Flew, who spent his time in the 70s and 80s defending atheism in public debates, something Emmaus-like seems to be happening right now, as the latest issue of *Christianity Today* tells of his embrace of belief in the existence of God.

And it happens in Grand Rapids. Over at St. Luke’s AME Zion church on Delaware Street, pastor Eleazar Merriweather testifies to God’s grace working in the lives of two brand new Christians through their small groups ministry.

Last week, Ed Dobson told his congregation at Calvary Church of a drug dealer that moved here last fall from a big city out East, developed a \$500 a day cocaine habit, until he developed the habit of watching Calvary Church’s cable TV

broadcast on Sundays. Emmaus Road happened for him on Grand Rapids Cable TV. Imagine that.

And don’t forget about ministry here. Every time a young person walks into this sanctuary to profess their faith in Jesus, it is evidence of an “Amazing Grace” journey, God at work. Further demonstration that that the power belongs to God and does not come from us.

Indeed, the Bible that Jesus opened on Emmaus is just as powerful now as it was then. And while we don’t have the just-raised human Jesus walking next to us in same way as he was present at Emmaus, Jesus is surely present. Through the Holy Spirit, we have walking with us nothing less than the body of Christ, the church, the place where Jesus’ own disciples are called to offer companionship, truth-telling rebuke, patient teaching and fellowship meals.

And just to be clear, if Jesus is active among us in these ways—what again is he like? Emmaus Road shows us that this Jesus is:

- not passive ethereal being, but a pursuer.
- not a benign, congenitally nice associate, but one who risks speaking the truth in love
- not a coercive overpowering presence, but a patient teacher
- not a isolated, individualistic prophet, but a guest. . even a host. . whose true character is seen in table fellowship.

Indeed, the gospel offers us the comfort of knowing that we have a Savior who addresses our questions and enters into situations where hope seems lost. . . It is a message of hope

for every parent who worries about a grown-up child who has given up on Jesus, and for every child who loves Jesus and worries about a parent who doesn't. .

If you are here today as a guest and find all this intriguing, we invite you to walk with us. We believe that none of us can generate a spiritual awakening by our own effort. But we know who can. And this One, our risen Lord, meets us through the Holy Spirit in our wrestling with scripture and in our breaking of bread.

Emmaus in Our Praying

So how do we go home from a sermon about Emmaus road? What difference should this make in how we live and pray?

To get at that, think about one of the most profound moments in a worship service. It slips by in only a minute or two—the little prayer for illumination right before the reading of scripture. It is a prayer that asks for the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the truth of Christ as we read scripture together and listen to sermons. This morning we sang one of the most theologically profound versions of the prayer I know. . “all our knowledge, sense, and sight lie in deepest darkness shrouded. . ‘til your Spirit breaks our night with your beams of truth unclouded.”

This is a prayer of humility and hope. It is a prayer that is as appropriate for home and work as in church. It is a prayer that can become a way of life.

For a week, try praying each day with your hands open, asking for the Holy Spirit to help you see Christ's sheer goodness.

It's a prayer we can start praying when we're about 3 years old, as soon as we learn to sing: “Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.”

Notice, the song doesn't go: “We've opened our eyes, Lord, and now we see Jesus.” That mixes up who does the eye-opening.

And it doesn't go: “Open our eyes, Lord, so we can feel happy or get richer.”. . . That mixes up what we see.

Like Emmaus Road, the song insists:

God opens eyes. It's a sheer gift.
And when God does,
what we see is nothing less than our risen Lord,
pursuing despondent disciples
in all kinds of out the way places,
and then working to correct us, teach us, nourish us, and
enlighten us,
with the kind of truth that will never let us go.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

John D. Witvliet
April 2005

PRAYER OF APPLICATION

Lord Jesus Christ,
Stay with us—
In every part of our journey,
no matter how full of doubt or fear we may be.

Through your Holy Spirit,
open our eyes, we pray.
Help us see you as our Risen Lord.
In all your beauty and loving power.
Amen.

BENEDICTION

As we leave this place
to continue our post-Easter journeys,
receive God's blessing:

May the God who said,
"Let light shine out of darkness,"
shine in your hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit
to give you light of the knowledge of the glory of God
in the face of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen."