

“A Long, Strange Trip”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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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?” ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.”

²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?” ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In 1976, our nation celebrated its Bicentennial, Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in the presidential race, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak formed Apple Computer, the Viking I spacecraft landed on Mars, *Rocky* was released, the \$2 bill was reintroduced into circulation, and the Grateful Dead released their second Greatest Hits collection, which was entitled *What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been*.

The album, or more accurately double album, was a hit and has since been certified as Platinum, which according to the Recording Industry Association of America means that at least 500,000 copies of it have been sold. Now, before anybody starts drawing any assumptions about my musical preferences, I am not a fan of the Dead, nor have I ever knowingly listened to any of their music. Furthermore, I am not some storehouse of information about the recording industry. It is only by the grace of the Internet that I know what I do about the Grateful Dead or the recording industry.

The song lyric, however, is another matter. That I've known since the early 1990s, when a colleague of mine in my first development job after business school was unceremoniously fired from his position. I sent him a message later that day, saying I was sorry to see him go. Ken graciously replied to me and, while politic about the matter, referenced the Dead, observing, "What a long, strange trip it's been."

That quote and that day have stayed with me ever since. Ken's ruthless termination wasn't because he'd done anything illegal or dishonorable. He simply disagreed with the strategy of our division leadership and wanted to change things. They weren't interested in change and, well, just about all of us wound up leaving for jobs elsewhere over the subsequent couple of years.

Now, you may wonder why I am telling you this story. Well, perhaps you've noticed that I wanted to get you from A to Z, and rather than take you along a more direct route, I wanted to share some scenery with you, to give you some context, to make this seem real to you in a way that just saying, "I once worked in a toxic environment," would not. While the short version would have been true, it would not have been complete. I learned a lot in that job, including what not to do when I became a manager and how to treat one's colleagues in the midst of a difficult situation. I made some good friends, with whom I'm still in touch, and yes, I learned a song lyric that I was able to use in today's sermon.

The story of Emmaus is indeed about a "long, strange trip." It is one of the most famous in Scripture, but for all its renown, it appears only in Luke's Gospel, which is why we have departed from John, which is our primary Easter text during this lectionary cycle. We can see the differences between the two. Luke is very much a story, and its overarching theme is that of a journey of discovery, for the disciples, for their world, and for us, too, as we all learn who Jesus truly is. John, meanwhile, is a more mystical and poetic take on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; in many ways it is a theological statement as much as it is a story.

So this week we detour to Luke and this strange post-Crucifixion story about a road trip. As we shall see, it complements last week's reading about Thomas and his response to the resurrection. But we will also see that while it shares things in common, it also has illustrative differences.

This passage contains an introduction to two disciples we have not met before: Cleopas and his unnamed companion. N. T. Wright argues that Cleopas is the same person as Clopas, the husband of Mary, as described in John 19:25. Names can have variant spellings in different texts and places, my own first name being a perfect example. I like the idea that Cleopas was traveling with Mary rather than some nameless person; it heightens the intimacy within this rich story. Further, the idea that Mary—who was one of the women at the foot of the cross, and who had experienced the pain of seeing Jesus die—would be present for this revelation further adds to the depth of the passage.

What would it have been like to depart Jerusalem in the wake of the awful events of Good Friday, to have all of one's dreams seemingly shown to be empty, to see one's hopes fully and cruelly dashed? From their answers to the man they meet along the way, we can assume that Mary and Cleopas knew all too well. They had been awaiting a Messiah, and instead bitter disappointment had arrived. What could they look forward to? Nothing. How far could they go on bad memories? Nowhere. Just what lessons would they take from this awful ending to what must have been an electric chapter in their lives? None that justify the pain.

True, they spoke with enthusiasm about Jesus the prophet, their hopes and dreams and all that. But still. Nothing had come of their devotion, their expectations. Or so they thought.

Their disappointment was met with shock by Jesus. How did they not understand? If Jesus were not the loving Son of God, it would be easy to imagine him blurting out, "How can you not see? Are you really that dense?" Instead, he gives them a tutorial, a review of the Hebrew Bible that tells them that the Messiah had to suffer—and that was a shock to them. They, along with everyone else at the time and, to some degree, still today, believe that a Messiah *conquers* suffering, that a Messiah helps us to *avoid* suffering, that a Messiah, well, he just makes everything *right*. But that is not the way the God of Israel works. He works *in* history, *through* history, not doing the magical thing that people may think they want but taking them to the holy place they need to be.

In the case of Cleopas and Mary, it was to a table in a town a few miles from Jerusalem. When the travelers invited their unrecognized friend to join them for a meal and to stay with them, they were extending the hospitality expected in their culture. And so, Jesus joined them at table—which is when this story really gets interesting.

I believe that this passage would be better known as "The Meal in Emmaus" or "At the Table in Emmaus." What happens on the road, when the three were talking about what had happened in Jerusalem, is very important. Still, it is only a prelude to the heart of the story, which follows as bread is broken and shared.

Now, you may remember that I noted earlier that there were similarities and differences between this week's lesson and last week's about Thomas. Both take place post-Crucifixion and, unknown to the protagonists, post-Resurrection. But there is a difference, and it is significant. Thomas, when told about the resurrection of his friend and teacher, never denied the possibility of such a thing happening; he just wanted proof that it had happened as he'd been told. Cleopas and Mary, on the other hand, seem pretty sure that the story of Jesus had come to an end, that he was dead and there was no more to say. Thomas had questions; Cleopas and Mary had resignation. Thomas allowed for hope, as outlandish as that might have seemed, while Cleopas and Mary appeared open only to a sense of futility. I believe that is what provoked Jesus into his reaction and then his impromptu Bible Study. While Thomas was open to the idea of a suffering Messiah, Cleopas and Mary were not. Like so many before them, and so many to come, right down to the present day, they were unwilling or unable to see how God might cause good to arise from suffering.

I want to be clear here: I am not saying that God creates suffering so he might then cause something good to happen. That would be wrong in the extreme. However, when suffering occurs, God may act to redeem the situation. Consider the things doctors and scientists have learned in the midst of wars and pandemics. Humans did not cause fighting to break out or an illness to erupt just so somebody could invent radar or penicillin. Those were two discoveries that occurred in the midst of much suffering, and while we may decry the circumstances in which they were developed, we do not shun the inventions. It is the same with God. Remember, our God acts in history, not beyond it. He will take a circumstance and turn it to his redemptive will. This is what Cleopas and Mary seemed unable to accept.

And yet. And yet.

Cleopas and Mary did not stray from the way of Jesus. They welcomed a stranger into their lives. Though they mourned his death, they still praised Jesus to their companion. And when arriving at their destination, rather than just waving goodbye and seeing him off, they invited him, offering not only hospitality but a refuge.

Jesus saw that these two, who could not recognize him for who he was, might yet be able to see. And so, he used a setting redolent with meaning. Recall that on the night before he was betrayed, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. He took bread, blessed it, then broke it, and shared it with the twelve, and would now do the same with Cleopas and Mary.

Taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing. These are the things we do when we share the bread at the communion table. This passage might have had more resonance for us if we had read it on the first Sunday of the month, when we traditionally come to the

Lord's table. But think of those churches more rooted in the sacramental tradition than we are, those congregations that celebrate the Eucharist every week. Then read of this meal that Jesus shared with Cleopas and Mary, and I hope the importance of this lesson will be made manifest to you. For just as Jesus was revealed to Cleopas and Mary in the sharing of the bread, he is made real for us when we come to the table.

It matters not whether one believes in the real presence, the idea that Jesus is physically present in the elements, or subscribes to Memorialism, the notion that we reenact his Last Supper, and thus remember his gifts and lessons, at the table. It matters not whether we are gathered in a sanctuary or we are celebrating communion on the Internet. In all of these situations and settings, Jesus is alive with us and for us when we gather with others to share the meal he gave us.

Communion has rightly been associated with the Last Supper, but that has connotations of sadness about it. I would think communion should also be associated with this First Supper, that it should be celebrated in joy as a meal of the Resurrection, not only of Jesus but also of us.

In these days, we are on a long, strange trip, one whose end we cannot see at present. We may believe we know where we will wind up, but honestly, who among us can say? At the very least, we do not know how or when we will arrive. Many of us will identify with the child in the back seat of the car who, during a family road trip, constantly asks, "Are we there yet?" The truth is, we all want to be in Emmaus right now. But we are not, and our faith in Jesus will help us navigate the path forward. In this moment of uncertainty, it is that much more important for us to hold onto, to embrace with all our hearts and strength, the community that Jesus has given us, the gift of new life that he offers us, and the way to renewed Easter life that he has promised us.