



Journey with Jesus— The Emmaus Road

A Sermon by Pastor Robyn Ramer Hogue

Luke 24:13-35

April 15, 2018

Today's sermon is for people who sometime wonder, "Is Jesus really real?" It's for you if you've ever doubted that God was there. I'm preaching to you today if your religion has ever let you down, if you've ever run out of hope. Which means you don't need this sermon if you are 100% sure of your faith all the time. If you never have any doubts about God or Jesus, then God bless you, I'm not talking to you today. Feel free to look at the bulletin. Take a Bible from the pew and read for a while. Make a grocery list. Because this sermon and this gospel account are for people who sometimes wonder where God is and if Jesus is real.

For a lot of people, the Christian faith seems disconnected from the rest of how we think and feel and get on with life. I don't believe these people are atheists for the most part. They may believe, kinda-sorta, in a God who is loving and good; they might accept that Jesus lived and died and rose again. But these seem distant truths. The problem for a lot of people, isn't that the faith isn't believable; the problem is that it isn't relevant, it just doesn't seem to matter. They affirm the faith in the same way they are able to affirm that the planet Venus is 67 million miles from the sun. It's trustworthy information, to be sure, but not much help in living every day.

If you are one of those people, or if you know someone like this, then this is a gospel account for you. Because here's the thing: when we journey with Jesus, we don't always know He's there.

The original journey to Emmaus took place on Easter day. In the wake of Jesus' death, two of His followers have given up and left town. While they're walking and talking, Jesus comes and walks with them. But, Luke reports, "their eyes were kept from recognizing Him." The Bible doesn't say "they failed to recognize Him," but "their eyes

were kept from recognizing Him.” In other words, it wasn’t their fault, it wasn’t some problem with their eyes or with their faith. No one’s blaming them.

Maybe grief or disappointment got in their eyes. After all, their hopes in Jesus have been dashed, their expectations left unmet. They’d been so excited about Jesus, put so much faith in Him, that when He died there didn’t seem to be anything to do but leave ... put it all behind them. Oh sure, there were some people who said Jesus was alive again, but who could believe talk like that?

They hadn’t seen Him. So, on they walked, telling this stranger about their problems with Jesus, never suspecting the stranger *was* Jesus.

The journey to Emmaus is for the disappointed, for those whose expectations have gone unmet. It’s the road you walk when you don’t make the team, when your candidate loses, your sweetheart won’t talk to you, and your loved one has died.

It’s the road we find ourselves on when all the ways we used to feel close to God just don’t work any longer. That’s the Emmaus road. Does it sound familiar?

But here’s the amazing and wonderful promise of the gospel: on our road of loneliness and despair, *we are not alone*. Oh, we may think we’re alone, but we’re not. That One who joins you along the way, the One who hears your disappointment and your heartache, the One you complain to about Jesus letting you down—yep, that’s Jesus.

Which means that Jesus may not look like we expected. No beard or sandals, no long hair or piercing eyes. Jesus might look like, well, like one of the people here in the sanctuary today. Jesus might look like the person who listens to you after church. Jesus might look like the stranger at the hospital who brings you a tissue when you’re crying, or the coach who offers encouragement when you’re about to quit.

Why do I call these people Jesus? Because the Emmaus road story does. And because it’s true. If we’re looking for the Risen Jesus in all His resurrected glory, we may look forever. If we’re expecting a voice from heaven or some dramatic divine sign, we might still be looking. And if you’re waiting for absolute certainty before you believe, we may wait the rest of your life.

The promise of the gospel is this: When you think you're all alone, you're not. Jesus is the companion along the way.

Here's another thing about the Emmaus road: a lot of times we don't know it's Jesus until later, after the fact.

Cleopas and his friend walk with Jesus *for miles*. They talk about their faith and about their lack of faith. They share a meal, never knowing, never even suspecting, who it is. It isn't until Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them that they know who it is. These actions, this bread—they've seen this before. They remember. But no sooner do they recognize Him than He vanishes; He's gone again. It's only looking back that they know. Oh, the signs were there all along—Jesus explained the scriptures to them, their hearts burned within them—but only looking back do they put it all together.

Isn't that the way it is? Years ago, when I was a girl of ten, I had my appendix removed in an emergency surgery. In the night before my discharge, my dad was in a terrible car accident. The nurse came and told me before breakfast that it would be long while before my mom could come for me to go home because my dad was in surgery. I started to cry and she held me until I could calm down. It turned out to be a long and complicated surgery for my dad.

I remember praying and I'll admit, praying felt like talking into a dead phone line. Never had I felt so all alone.

But every so often, every forty-five minutes or so, the nurse came to my bedside and asked, "Are you doing okay?" And I would mumble, "I'm all right," because that was what I was supposed to say. Finally, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew that nurse was gently rocking my shoulders and saying, "Wake up, honey, wake up—the surgeon is done and your mom is coming to talk to you." And suddenly I knew, I just knew, that Jesus had been with me all the while. The nurse vanished out the door. And now, looking back, I know. I'd been a girl on the Emmaus road, and on that road, even when you think you're all alone, you're not. Jesus is your companion on the way.

But we only seem to know it in retrospect, after the fact. So, if you're on the Emmaus road—the road of doubt and disappointment—take heart, be patient, and keep your eyes open. Jesus is there somewhere.

So, if you're one of those people I'm preaching to today—if you sometimes wonder if Jesus is real, if you've doubted that God was there, if your faith has let you down or if you've ever run out of hope—what can you do to find Jesus again? What can you do to see and feel that God is there?

Well, you can't *make* it happen. Remember, our scripture says “their eyes were kept from recognizing” Jesus. It wasn't that they weren't looking. And they didn't recognize Him until *He* blessed and broke the bread. Revelation comes from God, not from us.

Still, in this story there are things you can do to cultivate, to prepare the way for an experience of God. And they're simple things. When people get spiritually discouraged they seem to think they have to do some new and drastic thing. They'll change churches, or try out a whole new religion, or give up altogether. If those things work, praise God. But the Emmaus story suggests far more basic things.

First, welcome strangers. What would have happened if these two discouraged disciples hadn't welcomed the stranger to talk and stay with them? They would have remained discouraged and probably wouldn't have been disciples for long.

This really happened: one Friday night at Maynard Avenue Church, Barbara Brown Taylor was in the parlor eating pizza and leading a Bible study on this very scripture. One of the men asked the question, “What would have happened if these two disciples hadn't welcomed this stranger?” Barb said, “Then they would have missed seeing Jesus.” And right then, I mean right then, two people came to the door. They were a bit disheveled and weren't wearing coats, though it was cold out. They were reluctant to come in; they were shy about interrupting. But the group convinced them to stay for Bible study and eat some pizza. Eventually they got them coats and a place to stay and formula for their grandchild, while they helped the group know what it means to be the hands and feet of Christ. Did not their hearts burn within them that night, and in their years of fellowship with that family! And none of it would have happened if they hadn't welcomed a stranger.

Second, open the Bible. I know, I know, for a lot of people the Bible has become the last place they'd look for the presence of God. It's a hard book. Parts of it seem oppressive and out of date. It's gets used in heavy-handed ways. And it's still the Word of the Living God. It was when Jesus explained the scriptures to them that the two disciples felt their hearts on fire. If the Bible's not working for you, read a different part of it. Join a different study group. Find a different teacher. But don't give up on the Bible.

And finally, most of all, Jesus became known in the breaking of the bread. Often in our spiritual discouragement we abandon the old for something new, or for nothing at all. But Jesus has not left the Communion Table. The Lord is everywhere, but He is always present in the breaking of the bread.

So, if I've been preaching to you today—if you sometimes wonder if Jesus is real, if you've doubted that God is there, if your faith has let you down or if you've ever run out of hope, here's the promise of the gospel: When you think you're all alone, you're not. Jesus is the companion along the way.

It may not seem like much—a piece of bread, an open Bible, a stranger on the way. It may not be much, but here's what it is—it's Jesus. He's with you all the way.

See Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* page 20



Skyline Presbyterian Church, where we love God, follow Christ and serve others

Join us for worship any Sunday at 10am
We meet at 6301 Westgate Blvd, Tacoma WA
Find out more at www.skylinepres.org