

Abide with Us  
Luke 24:13-49

“...and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, ‘Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.’ And he went in to tarry with them.”

Three weeks later and it is still Easter Day in Luke’s Gospel. The morning had brought a report from the women that Jesus’ tomb was empty. Moreover, two men in dazzling clothes had told them that Jesus was alive. No one believed their report, of course, even though the rumor was beginning to spread through Jerusalem like wild fire. What were Jesus’ followers to do? It was Sunday, after all—the day that is Monday for the Jews. Life had already resumed in the rest of the world as if nothing had happened. Perhaps it was simply time to get back to work, back to the family, back to the human condition, “The condition to which some who have gone as far [as Jesus’ followers had gone]/Have succeeded in returning,” T.S. Eliot wrote. “They may remember/The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,/Maintain themselves by the common routine,/Learn to avoid excessive expectation.”

According to Luke, two of Jesus’ followers, two who were not part of the eleven, decide to get out of town and head for Emmaus. The one is named Cleopas, the other, an unnamed character, maybe his wife, but that is just a guess. Whoever they were, I think Luke means for us to imagine ourselves in their sandals. At a brisk pace, the seven mile walk to Emmaus would have taken them a little under two hours. Likely, because they were talking along the way about matters of such consequence, I imagine they were taking their time, having trouble putting one foot in front of the other.

Why Emmaus? Emmaus is the sort of destination we choose when we no longer know where we are going. Maybe it was their hometown and they were returning to the familiar places and people in order to deal with their grief and disappointment. Maybe, as another preacher named Frederick Buechner surmised, Emmaus was “no place in particular really, and the only reason they went there was that it was some seven miles distant from a situation that had become unbearable...Emmaus,” he says, “is the place where we spend much of our lives, you and I, the place that we go in order to escape—a bar, [a bed, a distant land], wherever it is [that] we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’...Emmaus is whatever we do...to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred; that even the wisest and the bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [mortals] have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life,” and, by association, of theirs.

The first thing I want to say to you this morning is that the road to Emmaus is the precisely the road where Jesus comes alongside of us as a stranger, prompting us to tell him about our troubles, our sorrows and griefs, our burdens that are too heavy to bear without him now that he is dead and we no longer believe he was anything more than a merely human being. He listens as we try to make sense of the senselessness of death without him. “At its most fundamental level,” Peter Marty wrote, perhaps with the Emmaus road in mind, “prayer is conversation with God and conversations engage a relationship. They involve give-and-take and the sharing of company.” You could say that the conversation on the road to Emmaus, if not prayer, was at least the precursor to a conversation these two would have with this stranger for the rest of their lives. So first, Jesus comes alongside us precisely on the road to Emmaus.

The second thing I want to say to you has to do with how Scripture becomes God’s means of grace to us, even though initially we may not understand or take the meaning of the stranger’s words to heart. In response to the story we are telling him about our sadness and grief in the face of death’s finality, he chides us because it is obvious that the Scriptures read and interpreted have had no effect on the way we make sense of life or death. Do I not know that after 21 years of preaching and teaching in this community? Neither has Jesus’ life, death and resurrection had any effect on what we hang our hearts on or how we see the events of our times or how we act in the world. How many times had Jesus said to them that he must suffer and be rejected and die before he was raised to glory? So beginning with Moses, he tells them the old, old story one more time and one more time, they do not get it. Imagine a Far Side cartoon. In the bubble above Jesus’ head, what he says: the story of God’s redeeming purposes in history; and in the bubble above our heads, what we hear: “Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” I

imagine this because Luke does not say a word about the response of Cleopas and his companion to Jesus' interpretation of the text. Not even a "nice sermon, pastor" when he finishes his tour de force.

This leads me to a third thing I must say to you this morning. When Jesus finishes his exegesis of Scripture, it is clear that these three have reached a crossroads. Notice that Jesus is walking ahead of them as though he were going on. In other words, on the first day of the week, the day every week when the church celebrates his resurrection, he leaves us free to return to our lives without him. Moreover, at every crossroads in our lives we can say something to the effect that it was an interesting conversation while it lasted and thank him for joining us. It is what some of our young people will do at the end of their confirmation experience, what some parents will do after exposing their children to the option of a relationship with God, what many do when the God of their childhood no longer has the answers that suffice in the face of death, what you and I do every Sunday afternoon when we leave this sanctuary and return to the human condition without him. Because, Luke implies, the love that he is can be love only if we are free not to love him.

So "he made as though he would have gone further," as King James puts it, "but the two constrain him." The two act on a habit built into their Jewish bones. They say to the stranger, "Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent." They invite him in to be their guest for the night. They know the Scriptures just enough to remember the three strangers Abraham and Sarah invited in, angels sent by God to tell them that Sarah in her old age would give birth to the child of God's promise; and they remembered, as well, Moses' words to the Israelites in the wilderness, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Still they do not know who he is, only that he is a stranger in need of hospitality. That is the fourth thing I want to tell you today as we commit ourselves to making our church and so making us a community that more and more invites the stranger to abide with us; to feel welcomed by glass doors on the Avenue; to feel invited in the back door by the space that will be opened up and a hallway that is gracious; to be gathered and transformed from strangers to family around a new and inclusive table in the kitchen. As we invite the stranger in, as we refuse in these divided times to keep the alien at what we are told is a safe distance, we thereby say to our living Lord, "Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent."

Jesus tarries and the stranger becomes the guest, the guest becomes the host. "When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." Then and only then were their eyes opened wide enough to recognize him--in the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread. Likely these two were not at table on Thursday night last but had been in the crowd when Jesus took five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. This is the way of his being known to us, a way that we miss when we let the stranger continue down the road because the day is nearly over and we are weary; a way we miss when we break bread only with kith and kin; a way we miss when we fail to show hospitality. Even though we are about to sing "Abide with Me," the text in Luke is plural, suggesting that this is the church with whom Jesus is tarrying. Abide with us, we pray when the day is far spent. And he tarries with us too.

The last thing I want to say to you has to do with the way of his abiding. The moment the two recognized him, Luke says that he vanished from their sight. His abiding with us as individuals and as his church is not an abiding we can conjure or control. Neither is his living presence something we can see or secure. But once he vanished, the two (gathered now in his mane) talked together about their experience of him: how they had been moved by him on the road, even though they did not know who he was; how he had opened up the meaning of the Scriptures, even though they did not understand until this moment. His abiding with us, Buechner concludes, is often in the "everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only...the gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all of our being and our imagination—if we live not from vacation to vacation, from escape to escape, but from the miracle of one instant of our precious lives to the miracle of the next—what we may see is Jesus himself, what we may hear is the first faint sound of [his] voice somewhere deep within us saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives, whether we can understand it or not; and that this purpose follows behind us through all of our doubting and being afraid, through all of our indifference and boredom, to a moment when suddenly we know" that our destiny is not Emmaus where we escape nor is it the grave where we die: our destiny is the love that abides with us.