

To Have Lost Him
Luke 24:13-35

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

God only knows why Cleopas and an unnamed follower of Jesus set out for Emmaus that afternoon. It was, after all, the afternoon of the day when they woke not only to the news that Jesus' tomb was empty, but also to the claim that he was alive. Except for Peter, who ran to see the empty tomb for himself, the rest of the men thought the report of the women about Jesus' rising was fake news, an “idle tale” as Luke puts it. I love the cartoon some of you have sent me that has the men saying to the women, “So ladies, thanks for being the first to witness and report the resurrection. And we'll take it from here.” But where were they going to take what, exactly? On the afternoon of Easter, two of the men were going to take themselves to Emmaus.

Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad offers one compelling reason for their seven mile journey. Preaching to a congregation of the Confessing Church in Germany on the Monday after Easter in 1939, he draws their attention to the uniqueness of the Emmaus Road story, “namely that it shows us people who once had Christ but have now lost him.” *People who once had Christ but have now lost him*. Von Rad, no doubt, was thinking of German Christians. The theology faculty at the University of Jena had just dissolved the discipline of Old Testament, abolished the Hebrew language exam, and transformed the Old Testament chair into a “Chair for the History of Near Eastern Religions.” Every other church in Jena was led by ministers who had sworn allegiance to the Third Reich. This convictional teacher of the Old Testament was surrounded by a church and a university that once had Christ but now had lost him.

I find myself wondering, on the third Sunday after Easter: How many of us sitting in this sanctuary are people who once had Christ but now have lost him? Once we lived in relation to him but now we are living without him. Once in faith we shouted “He is risen!” on Easter morning, but now it seems to us an idle tale. Once we left our old selves behind to begin a whole new life with him but now we rarely think of him. Once we saw every other through the eyes of his love, but now in the real world of division and distrust, that love seems as dead as he is. *Once we had him but now we have lost him*. I also wonder about the people sitting on the rolls of this church who once had Christ but now have lost him. Parents who stood at the baptismal font making promises to a child now grown but have, themselves, lost him. A young person confirmed on these steps, her life changed by work camps and youth fellowship, who once had Christ but has now lost him. An elder ordained to his service, then disillusioned with the humanity of the church, who once had Christ but now has lost him. This is how it is with his followers on the Emmaus Road.

“If the one who was their anchor and hope no longer exists,” von Rad says of the two bound for Emmaus, says of German Christians, says of us, “then being adrift and hopeless is more dangerous than it had been, and the darkness of the world has become even more impenetrable. So, expecting nothing of this Jesus Christ, they are going away from him. (Had they a glimmer of hope, they would have remained where his grave and his community of disciples were.) They are going away. They are turning away from him.”

Ironically, their lives with him had begun with their turning away from simply everything and everyone else. For three years, according to Luke, they were with him when he healed a man with leprosy, a child with epilepsy, a woman who could not walk, a boy who could not see. They were in the room when he raised a little girl and a widow's son from the dead, exorcised demons, and forgave sins. They saw him walk on water, still the wind and waves, feed the multitude with five loaves and two fish. They listened as he spoke in parables and argued with Pharisees. But in all of those moments, they had him, they were with him, he was by their side, they belonged to him. Now after his death, all they had were bittersweet memories.

Sometimes I think that is all we think we have too. We have a book that contains the memories of those who once had him. We have the stories and sayings that they wrote down a few decades after his death. We even have this idle tale of his resurrection, but we have left that behind for the certainty of life in Emmaus. Like the two on the road that day, we may even have the whole of Scripture vaguely available to us as a book whose plot and characters inform our ethics, shape our values, influence our culture, but we have lost *him*. And I am here to tell you that without him as our living anchor and hope, being adrift and hopeless in these perilous times, times of sarin

gas attacks, of sinister tyrants, of deep divisions, and so of death's dominion, without him the world is more dangerous and the darkness of the world more impenetrable than we can bear.

But curiously like those two on the road to Emmaus, even as we are turning away from him, we are still talking *about* him because we believe we can no longer talk *to* him. Some of us even go to school for three years to learn how to talk *properly* about him. Whereas the Department of Old Testament was banished in von Rad's time, now departments of religion talk about him as departments of history talk about famous men. Even his church acts as though we are following someone who lived two thousand years ago, someone about whom dead white men once wrote, someone over whom church councils still fight and will fight until they are, like him, dead.

Take heart, however, for there is good news in this story: precisely on the road they and we have chosen as the reasonable and rational escape route from his living presence, there he finds us, comes up alongside of us, and interrogates us. "He is even near to those who have 'lost' him," von Rad pencils into his manuscript. But the two do not recognize him and neither do we. Luther said that Jesus reveals himself by hiding himself under contrary appearance. The two disciples address him as a stranger—the Greek word means alien, a word that gets at their complete incredulity: "Are you from a different country, a different planet?" they ask.

Then they share some not so good news with him, giving a nod to the fake news being spread by the women. They even say to Jesus that while they had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel, clearly they had bet their lives on a loser. You can imagine von Rad's delight when Jesus calls them fools and slow of heart to believe, not in the resurrection or in the testimony of the women, but slow to believe all that the prophets declared in the Old Testament. Right there, in the middle of the road, Jesus interprets to them the things about himself in the Old Testament, things they would not know or see unless they first found him whom they had lost in the Old Testament.

But still there is no recognition. "Reports of missing bodies are not enough. Stories of visions are not enough. The scriptures are not enough. Not even a good sermon...preached by Jesus himself," my friend and colleague Stan Sanders says, will open their eyes in such a way that they will recognize him. Then, as they draw close to home and eventide begins to fall fast, they invite him to abide with them. I love that Jesus was walking ahead of them, as if he were going on, when they urged him strongly to stay. At the end of every day and all of our Emmaus roads, he leaves us free to live without him, to lose him yet again, because the love that is love that is love that is love never coerces the beloved.

Abide with them he did. And when they sat down for supper, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. *Then* their eyes were opened and they recognized the alien at their table as Jesus. To recognize, Miriam Webster tell us, presumes we are referring to "something or someone previously known." The one they had and had lost was known to them, was recognized by them, in the breaking of bread.

If this morning you are among those who once had him and have lost him, you may have come to the right place. On the one hand, "worship is the social place," Stan Sanders reminds us, "where the church gathers to watch for and describe the presence of the resurrected Lord in our midst. And Easter is the season when we wash the dirt of the world from our collective corrective lenses, when the light of the resurrection shines into the darkened corners of our imaginations," opening the eyes of those who have lost him in the breaking of bread at this table.

But on the other hand, even this table is necessary but not sufficient. Those who have lost him may be kept from recognizing him because the hour of worship is also the social space of segregation and exclusion, the company at the table missing the alien in whose contrary appearance Christ is hiding. Imagine, instead, Christ revealing himself by hiding himself under the contrary appearance of a woman breaking bread at the Sleep Out for Covenant House, or under the contrary appearance of a guest you think you are serving who is serving you at Face to Face in Germantown, or as a construction worker Saturday on lunch break with a Make America Great Again baseball cap on who offers you half of his sandwich at the Habitat Diamond Park project. The one whom we had and have lost is also the one who was dead and is alive. He abides in the mess and noise of table fellowship, abides in and alongside aliens and outcasts who just may be equally surprised to recognize him in us! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.