

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
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Cleopas and another disciple of Christ were walking away from Jerusalem on a road to a town called Emmaus. We don't know where Emmaus was located or why these two disciples were headed there. All we know is that the text tells us it was seven miles from Jerusalem, as if that is the point—to get out of the city where their Savior was crucified.

The road to Emmaus is the path you take to walk away from your disappointments and grief. Maybe even your disappointments in the Savior. It can be the road home, back to work, to a weekend getaway, or just back to ordinary life. It doesn't need to be far—just seven miles away from your disappointment.

Along the way a third man joins them on their journey. We are told that this stranger is Jesus Christ who had just risen from the dead, but Cleopas and his companion cannot recognize him. Maybe, that's because they're too focused on their losses. One of the fascinating things about the appearances of the risen Lord is that he is so hard to recognize. Mary Magdalene thought he was just a gardener. Peter thought he was just a man on the shore asking about the fishing. Cleopas and his friend thought he was just a stranger making idle conversation.

As they walk along, Jesus begins to teach these two disciples how to read the Bible differently. That is always the starting place for discovering a new vision of Christ, and our salvation. He uses the Hebrew scriptures to indicate that Savior does not prevent loss but provides new life through our losses. The Messiah had to die to give us life, he explained. They told the stranger that they had heard rumors of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but they weren't at the tomb last Sunday, so they didn't see it. That's striking because all we have heard are the stories of resurrection, but we didn't see it either.

Since it was getting late on the journey, the two discouraged travelers invited the stranger to stay with them. They took the stranger in. We're not big on strangers. We teach our children to not even speak to them. But the strangers we fear the most are the failures, heartaches, grief, and losses that interrupt our carefully constructed lives. Sometimes, though, the Savior is enveloped in these strange losses of life. And again, according to the Gospel accounts if it is the risen Christ who is with you, at first, he will be hard to recognize.

The text tells us that Jesus walked on ahead, as if he was going on. But their hearts were burning within these men and they couldn't let him go. Neither can you if you are going to find hope on the road back to ordinary after Good Friday and Easter. You have to take the stranger in and invite Jesus to stay with you—even if you can't recognize him as a Savior.

Then, when they were at the table, Jesus took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to them. This is signature activity for Jesus Christ. It is what he did with the feeding of the 5,000. It is what he did on the Last Supper, and the establishing of the Eucharist. And it is what he did with his own life.

As Cleopas and the other disciple, who could be anyone, including us, saw Jesus holding the broken bread their eyes were opened. They finally saw that this was their risen Savior. He wasn't just holding broken bread, but also our broken dreams, broken bodies, and broken relationships. All of it is held in his own nail pierced hands.

This is part of what is proclaimed every time we come to the Lord's Table. It starts with a communion of brokenness. In this sacrament we come to see that everything that is broken in our lives, the church, and the world around us is held in the broken body of Christ. So, we do not vainly try to get our acts together to be worthy of having communion with God. We don't even try to get our spiritual act together. We come to this table of grace precisely because we are not together but broken. And here we commune with his broken body

and poured out blood. This is a Savior who has experienced the depths of how it is. That's where the communion begins. But then if we are paying attention, our eyes are opened and we see that this is the risen Savior who is holding us, which means the broken can rise to new life through him.

At the moment these two disciples recognized this stranger as the risen Christ, he vanished from their sight. The one who was visibly present, but unrecognized, became recognized, but now invisibly present. No longer an unrecognized visible stranger, he was now a recognized invisible Savior. Why does Jesus disappear from the sight the moment they recognize him? I think it is because he doesn't want to remain a stranger. What he wants is communion with you—which is what we find at the table.

As long as Jesus remained in the flesh, he was always a stranger to the disciples. They never knew who he was, and they never understood him. They were always saying things like, "Did you get that?" "No, I never know what he's talking about." Jesus was the one leading, healing, feeding, forgiving, and teaching—but always as someone "other" than them. But at this table the Spirit opens our eyes to see that we now have union with Christ. He is no longer other. You are no longer other. Now you are given com-union with the Savior.

We spend a lot of life feeling like we are "the other." We have a hard time making ourselves understood to people we care about. We even have a hard time understanding ourselves. But at school, the workplace, or in social settings we feel our lonely otherness more acutely. Even at church it looks like everyone else has their act together. But we have passions that are not understood, experiences that are not shared, and hurts that are not felt by those around us in the pews. And we know what we have done and left undone—things we could never confess. So even in a community where people know us, we all feel like there is a part of us that is a stranger.

This is even true in marriage. When couples come to pastors for pre-marital counseling, they typically knock themselves out to convince us that they know each other so well. And we pastors knock ourselves out to convince them they are not only to love the person they know but also the stranger who comes with that person. It may take a while, but the stranger always appears along the road and the challenge of marriage is learning to love that part of the spouse as well.

What this table of communion proclaims is that the God who knows all of us, and all about us, is literally dying to love us. So, there are no strangers at this table.

When Cleopas and the other disciple see that Christ is with them, not other than them, they immediately get up and head back to Jerusalem. But remember, Jerusalem was the place a place of loss, grief, and fear that they had just left. Why did they go back? It was not because they had a new vision of Jerusalem. Rather, it was because they have a new vision of communion with the risen Savior with them. And that gave them a new vision of themselves. Now their fear has turned to courage, and their despair to hope.

Now they, and we, can become something of a sacrament as a people who also are taken, blessed, broken, and given to proclaim the love of God. Amen.