

We Make the Road by Walking

Luke 24:13–23, 28 – 31

April 18, 2021

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13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, **14** and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15** While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, **16** but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. **18** Then 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?"

19 He 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, **20** and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

21 But 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. **22** Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, **23** and 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....

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. **29** But 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. **30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

In his book *The Mind's Eye*, Oliver Sacks explores how the plasticity of the human brain compensates for different types of blindness. He weaves together clinical anecdotes from his practice as a neurologist, letters he's received, scientific studies, memoirs by blind people, and the results of brain imaging techniques. His longest chapter includes entries from his personal journal about his own experience of ocular melanoma.

Sacks explains how people can be blind in different ways and for different reasons, from birth defect, accident, injury, or disease. Lilian developed "visual agnosia" late in life. She could recognize the tiniest letters on an eye doctor's chart, but couldn't read words or music, even though she was a famous pianist. People with "object agnosia" can't recognize common objects like their own car, even though their visual acuity is normal. Sacks himself has "prosopagnosia," the inability to recognize faces. People with "deep blindness" lose even their interior mental images.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus suffered from blindness. They talked *about* Jesus, recalling who he was and what he had done the preceding three years.

They even talked to Jesus, who walked with them for seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Nonetheless, "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him." (Luke 24:16)

They thought that Jesus was a political liberator, and ignored that in him God had been love incarnate, reconciled all things all things visible or invisible.

The story is a reminder of how often we remain oblivious to Divine presence. Jesus rebuked the two travelers as "foolish and slow of heart" (24:25). We acknowledge and name our different kinds of blindness — from human weakness, ignorance, denial, ego, fear.

The Emmaus disciples were blinded by their mistaken expectations about what God was doing in Jesus. The relentless and powerful lies of culture blind us to God's presence. Our family of origin shapes us in ways known and unknown. Geography shapes us by the power of place. Economic realities shapes us.

For many years I was blind to the depths of systemic racism and my white privilege. I knew it on one level, but this past year I have looked more deeply at the realities. In reading books like *Waking up White*, *Caste*, and *White Privilege*, articles, and watching documentaries, I have seen with new eyes patterns I did not see before. I know many in our congregation have been seeing in new ways and wrestling with this new clearer vision. We as a congregation are on a journey to discern what this new way of seeing means in terms of ministry, walking with more people of color, listening. There is a death to the old way of seeing. There is new life and resurrection. I am not sure where this journey will lead.

This is part of the role of the church – help us see, help us know our blind spots, help us wrestle with the social and economic questions that affect God's beloved people in our community. Each church I have served has been an opportunity for me to grow, to see more clearly, to experience the Spirit opening my eyes and heart. Here contemplative spirituality is woven deeply into our life as we worship, pray, read, service and work for peace and justice and come to the table.

The Emmaus story is a story about seeing and blindness. It is also a eucharist story, a sharing bread story, a communion story. Luke 24:30 says that Jesus "took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them." These words are identical to all three accounts of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:23, Luke 22:19). It was precisely when Jesus "broke the bread" that "their eyes were opened" (24:31), a detail that Luke repeats a second time: "Then the two told [the other disciples] what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by him when he broke the bread" (24:35).

I think about ways breaking bread can change someone's life. In her memoir *Take this Bread*, Sara Miles describes herself as a blue-state, secular intellectual, a lesbian, and a left-wing journalist living in San Francisco. She developed habits of deep skepticism from covering revolutionary movements in Central America. Her parents were actively hostile to religion. But about twenty years ago, Miles walked into Saint Gregory Episcopal Church in San Francisco, partook of the eucharist, and experienced a radical conversion. Before then she had never heard a gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer, and knew only one person who went to

church. She was on staff of St. Gregory for 10 years and started their food pantry that serves over 400 families a week.

The Greek word *eucharisto* means "to give thanks." This is what Jesus did in the first last supper: "He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them." And thanksgiving is precisely what Paul remembers and recommends to us: "When he had given thanks" (1 Corinthians 11:23–24). Bread is broken and shared after a walking together.

This Easter evening story from Luke of walking together is an invitation. An invitation to notice the smallness of things. Once Jesus and his companions are seated around the table, Jesus takes bread. So small a thing. So small a thing that changes everything.

During this past year of hard days of sheltering in place, hearing horrific stories of death and suffering, and fearing for our futures as individuals, families, communities, and nations, it's sometimes difficult to trust in the transformative power of small things. A bit of bread. A sip of wine. A common table. A shared meal.

But the Emmaus story speaks to this power — the power of the small and the commonplace to reveal the divine. God shows up during a quiet evening walk in our neighborhood. God is made known around our dinner tables. God reveals God's self when we take, bless, break, and give. God is present in the rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days.

What does this mean right now? It means God is in the text you send to the lonely neighbor or friend. God appears in the Zoom gathering, the phone call, the greeting card. Jesus is the stranger you see across the street when you walk your dog — both of you smiling beneath your masks. The amazing and ordinary moments of now being together in person because you and friends are vaccinated. If the Emmaus story tells us anything, it tells us that the risen Christ is not confined in any way by the seeming smallness of our lives. Wherever and whenever we make room, the Holy One is present inviting us to aliveness.

Luke ends his story with good news. When the disciples started Sunday morning on their journey to Emmaus, "their eyes were prevented from recognizing Jesus." The day ended with a dinner when "their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

So let's keep walking. We walk together. Keep telling the story. Keep honoring the stranger. Break bread together and share the bread and be fed. Keep listening. Watch out for your blind spots and selective seeing. May the Spirit keep opening our eyes and heart. May it be so. Amen.