

**“THE REAL PRESENCE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas,  
St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, April 11, 2021**

This morning our gospel lesson from Luke presents us with the story of the famous “Walk to Emmaus.” (*Luke 24:13-35*) It’s an account of another encounter between the risen Christ and several disciples. For these disciples it is a strange and unexpected experience.

The story is pretty simple. A fellow named Cleopas, accompanied by another unnamed disciple, are walking on Easter Day over the hills from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, about seven miles distant. Although the prospect of business in Emmaus has probably prompted them to take to the road, their thoughts are very much preoccupied with the events that have just unfolded in Jerusalem—namely, Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion, as well as the discovery of an empty tomb. Cleopas and his companion cannot stop talking about it. It’s a burden on their hearts. Luke tells us that they are sad-faced. (*Luke 24:17*)

The road to Emmaus was not large or wide. It was probably a lonely, deserted walk. Suddenly, however, there appears alongside the two men a stranger who doesn’t even introduce himself before intruding upon their conversation. “What are you talking about to each other, as you walk along?” the stranger asks. The stranger’s question stops Cleopas and his companion right in their tracks. Now they could have taken offense at the stranger’s boldness. Instead, Cleopas simply expresses incredulousness over the stranger’s apparent ignorance or naivete. Very pointedly he remarks: “Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have been happening there these past few days?” (*Luke 24:18*) When the stranger answers, “What things?” Cleopas, this time treating the stranger with something close to scorn, launches into an explanation that is revealing in every sense of the word.

He proceeds to explain that Jesus of Nazareth, who many looked upon as Israel’s long-awaited messiah and deliverer, was handed over to the Roman authorities to be tried, convicted and crucified for crimes against the state. Yet three days after his burial Jesus’ tomb is discovered empty by women of the community, who are also have a vision of angels telling them that in spite of everything he is still alive. Cleopas goes on to note that some of the men of Jesus’ circle also validated the fact of his empty grave.

Of course, just when Cleopas might be tempted to fall back on his heels self-satisfied with his explanation to this stranger and dunce, he gets a bit of a surprise. However gently, the stranger actually turns tables and rather reprimands him. “How foolish *you* are,” the stranger says. “How slow *you* are to believe everything the prophets said!” After all, “was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and to enter his glory?” (*Luke 24:26*)

This stranger, who must be getting stranger and stranger to Cleopas and his companion, proves to be very much informed about everything. Moreover, taking it even further, the stranger expounds with great thoroughness on Hebrew Scriptures going all the way back to Moses which are rich in prophecies about the messiah as a suffering servant.

At this point, Cleopas and his companion stand completely silent. They are probably flabbergasted, if not blown away, by the wisdom of their fellow traveler. So arrogant and condescending to the stranger just moments before, they *do* have reason to feel foolish.

Yet there is something about this stranger that doesn't put them off, even though he has called them up short. They are intrigued by him—attracted to him. As they approach Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion have the sense that the stranger intends to continue down the road without stopping. But, amid the gathering dark, they—with great earnestness—prevail upon him to join them in the village of Emmaus. Like most travelers recuperating from a day's journey's they then sit down to share a meal at their place of lodging.

Only here the tables turn one more time on Cleopas and his companion. Although the stranger is more-or-less the guest, he's the one who takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, and then passes it to Cleopas and his companion. In that act, in that moment, something close to a miracle happens. Cleopas and his companion, who have understood so little, now understand everything. They see what they could not before. The stranger with them is none other than the risen Christ—Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and buried but is alive.

Ironically, with this very moment of recognition, Jesus vanishes from their sight. However, it doesn't matter. They know what they saw. They know what they felt. They know what they experienced. And, looking back to their moments on the road with Jesus they realize that there were clues all along. As Cleopas and his companion affirm to each other: "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" (*Luke 24:32*)

Whatever plans Cleopas and his companion had for the night are now trumped by the compelling need to share what they have just experienced with others. As Luke informs us, they "got up at once." Ignoring both nighttime hazards and any physical exhaustion, they high-tail it back to Jerusalem in order to locate Jesus' apostles, who are deep in hiding. (*Luke 24:33*)

When they do find the eleven remaining apostles and report their experience to them, Cleopas and his companion are vindicated. They are not crazy. They did not imagine things. "The Lord is risen *indeed*," the apostles proclaim to them. "He has appeared to Simon" [Peter] as well! (*Luke 24:34*) Accordingly, Cleopas and his companion find ready

ears on the apostles' part as they tell about their extraordinary encounter on the road to Emmaus and "how they recognized" Jesus as he broke bread with them. (*Luke 24:35*)

With good reason the "Walk to Emmaus" is a beloved gospel story. It has inspired many. On the wall of my office hangs a cherished picture of a famous painting by great African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner depicting Jesus breaking bread with Cleopas and his companion. It is almost as iconic as Warner Sallman's paintings of the head of Christ, like the one that hangs in our church hallway outside Fellowship Hall that in different days we passed all the time.

Over the last thirty years, our gospel passage from Luke has also given rise to the popular "Emmaus Walk" retreats for men, intended to help them to take a look at Christ's presence in their own lives. However, all this still begs the questions that, at least for me, hangs over the whole Emmaus story. Namely, what prevented Cleopas and his companion from recognizing Jesus right away? Why did it take so long for the two disciples to see Jesus for who he is? Perhaps it's significant that Cleopas and his companion were disciples, rather than apostles. They probably didn't enjoy the level of daily intimacy with Jesus that the actual apostles had. In other words, they may have known Jesus mostly at a distance.

On the other hand, even Mary Magdalene, tearfully sitting in vigil outside the empty tomb, initially mistook Jesus for a cemetery groundskeeper. Such all-around confusion suggests that the resurrected Christ, transfigured in body, did look different than in his previous earthly state. As we all know, in those final weeks of ministry, Jesus was under great strain. The gospels tell us that while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane he was actually sweating blood, a sign of acute physiological stress. (*Luke 22:44*) Afterwards, Jesus endured torture—both beating and scourging. He was already badly battered by the time that he was nailed to Calvary's cross. The sight of Jesus in such a brutally altered condition would surely have seared itself into the memory of his followers, displacing any recollection of how he may have looked in earlier, calmer, and more carefree times. It's possible that Mary Magdalene and Cleopas were not simply prepared to see Jesus at ease again, free of anguish, suffering, and pain. And you certainly don't expect to see someone who is supposed to be dead walking around again!

For Mary Magdalene, it was Jesus speaking her name aloud that served as her touchstone of reality, making her realize in an instant that she was encountering Christ risen. For Cleopas and his companion it was the act of breaking bread together which brought home that they were truly in Christ's presence. If they had never sat at a table with Jesus before, as the actual twelve apostles had, they may nevertheless have had the privilege of being part of the great multitude whom our savior fed with five barley loaves and two fish when he was delivering his "Sermon on the Mount" or another sermon like

it. (*Mark 6:30-44*) In this way, one meal may have evoked another, fostering the “aha!” moment at the table in Emmaus. Memory is like that. It can be triggered by the weirdest, most curious things.

Significantly, gathering his apostles in an upper room in Jerusalem, Jesus instituted the custom of a divine supper together, which we today call “communion,” as a way to remember him. But for many of us as Christians it becomes something much more. Indeed, it’s a time and occasion in which we come to experience what the Great Protestant leader Martin Luther called the “real presence”—as in the real presence of the risen Christ. In many cases, as we initially share in communion as men and women of faith, we may not be so different from Cleopas and his road companion. For the longest time, we can partake of the communion elements without being spiritually touched or stirred. Communion may be rote, something we just do. Yet then on one Communion Sunday, for reasons that may elude us, we can suddenly feel Christ’s presence as never before. We see him in what we are doing, in what we are sharing. And communion is never the same for us afterwards. We have known the risen Christ as a vital, living presence in our midst, and that discovery transforms the act of communion forever.

This incredible experience is wonderfully expressed in a photograph of a communion service held in the chancel of our church. The photograph shows our church members gathered in a half-circle before the altar receiving the communion elements. By photographic artistry, the image of Christ—from the brush of the artist Warner Sallman—is superimposed on our gathering, suggesting his full intimacy with us as communicants through the bread and cup shared. This photo is usually hanging in the West Lobby of our church. But I have taken the liberty of displaying it before us today. It’s worth a look. It’s worth some thought and reflection.

Jesus always wants to be a part of our lives. Yet we also have to be ready to both see and welcome him. The Emmaus story give us some ideas as to how we can best ready ourselves. If you remember, Jesus gave both Cleopas and his companion a crash course on the scriptures. Likewise, we can all benefit from a little or lot more learning about what God’s word has to say to us—as our Tuesday morning and our youth-centered Wednesday night bible study groups do weekly.

Also, as you surely recall, Cleopas and his companion sat down with Jesus, breaking bread together. If we truly want to see and encounter the risen Christ, we similarly need to break bread with him in both a literal and figurative sense. I know that a lot of people today think that they can be solo Christians, just focusing on their private lives. But worshipping together matters, particularly since Jesus expressly told us that it “where two or three are gathered in my name” that we will find him best and most. (*Matthew 18:20*) Our mission work and outreach together as Christians counts too because Jesus

also encouraged us to look for his face in the face of the poor, the suffering, the afflicted. (*Matthew 25:31-46*) Yes, through study, through worship, through mission we can come to see and know Jesus, the risen Christ, as never before, even better than before.

The Old Testament Patriarch Jacob once fell asleep in a barren place called Bethel and had an incredible dream of angels descending and ascending between heaven and earth. He awoke to declare that “God is in this place and I didn’t even know it!” (*Genesis 28:10-18*) Congregation, the risen Christ is in this place even if we aren’t always aware of it. We just need the eyes to recognize him and the heart to embrace him. May God bless us with the vision and heart to do so. **Amen.**