

With Us on the Journey

Luke 24:13-35

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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I read once about a chemist working in the field of cancer research. He had a theory he thought would be the breakthrough that medical science was looking for. For 10 years he developed his theory—running tests in the laboratory, conducting this experiment and that, carefully studying all the data. Finally it came time to put his ideas and years of research to the test. He constructed his conclusive experiment and ran the test. It failed. He tried again. It failed again. Gradually, it dawned on him that his original idea, the one to which he had given 10 years of his life, was wrong. Imagine what that must have been like—to have staked ten years of your life on something that came up empty. For a long time everything looked so promising, but in the end, it was all for nothing. Imagine the disappointment.

My guess is that those travelers on the road to Emmaus that Easter afternoon were feeling something similar. Undoubtedly much of their walk was spent in painful silence. When they did speak, it was of the events of the past three days and the past three years. They had had such high hopes for Jesus.

They recalled what it was like three years earlier when they first met Jesus. Their lives had been rocking along; they were living a perfectly normal life: fishing, collecting taxes, doing the things normal people do. Then Jesus came along and called them to follow. They could never really fully explain why they did, but when Jesus called, they dropped everything and followed him.

For three years they stayed with him—watching him, listening to him, experiencing him. And the more time they spent with him, the more they came to believe that he was the long-expected messiah, the one the people of Israel had been looking for for years. During those three years it looked like Jesus really was the one the people had been waiting for—the one who would set Israel free.

But in the past three days all their dreams had come crashing down around them. The tragic events of the past three days had shown them that they were wrong. He wasn't the messiah after all, just another failed experiment. They had put their hopes in one who couldn't deliver. When it came time for the critical test, Jesus had failed. Rather than waging a mighty war to drive out the oppressor Romans—as they expected the Messiah to do—Jesus himself had been killed. Everything to which these disciples had committed themselves for those three years came to nothing. In the end, it turned out that he wasn't the one after all.

What deep disappointment they must have felt. Now all they could do was to pick up the pieces of their broken dreams and try to resume living. Like the rest of the disciples, they were heading home, looking for a new start.

As they were making their despondent walk to Emmaus, a stranger, someone they did not recognize, joined them. He asked them what they were talking about. They looked at him as if he were the only person in Jerusalem who hadn't heard about what had taken place. So they started at the beginning—telling about Jesus and about his life and his death and about their disappointment that he had not turned out to be the savior

they had been hoping for. To make matters worse, some of the women of their group had told him that his body had been stolen from the grave, and they did not know where he was buried.

Up to this point in the story, it appears that the travelers were the ones who understood what was going on, and the stranger was the one who was in the dark.

But how quickly the tables turned. The stranger began to talk, to teach. He told them how the scriptures had pointed toward the man Jesus—his life and his death—from the very beginning. He showed them how even from the time of Moses, God had been preparing the people for the coming of a messiah. He reminded them of the words of Isaiah the prophet who said that the messiah would suffer and die in accordance with God's eternal plan. And he pointed out how all of God's promises and God's words of love had come to completion in this one who had died. He told them that God's promises of life and forgiveness had been fulfilled in this one's death.

And as this stranger talked, a light slowly dawned on these two travelers. It was as if their hearts began to burn within them. The fire that they had felt when they had been with Jesus was being rekindled. It began to occur to them that perhaps they had been wrong about the things that had happened in the previous three days.

They arrived at their destination, and the stranger appeared to be planning to go on, but they asked him to stay with them, at least to eat supper with them before continuing on the journey. At the table, this stranger took the bread, blessed it, gave it to them, and their eyes were opened and they recognized him. It was Jesus, the risen Lord.

I love this story, and one of the things I love about it is that it takes place while these men were traveling. These men were on a journey.

Over and over again throughout the Bible, the image of a journey is used to describe people and their relationship with God. The best example of that is the forty years when the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness. Forty years on the way from slavery in Egypt to fulfillment in the Promised Land. Along that journey, God was with them—guiding them, disciplining them, teaching them, providing for them. What was important was not just arriving at the destination, but the journey itself.

You can also see this journey image in the New Testament. Look at the way the gospel writers tell about Jesus' ministry. So much of Jesus' teaching is done as they were on the road, traveling from one place to another. One of the names that was given to the early Christian church was "People of the Way." An organization that many members of our church have participated in is called the Presbyterian Pilgrimage. It's a weekend of spiritual enrichment and growth. They call it pilgrimage because they understand that the Christian life itself is a journey.

One of the great classics of Christian literature is *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. It was written back in the 1600s. The full title is *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which Is to Come*. It's a story about a man named Christian who is on a journey to the Celestial City. The book tells of Christian's experiences on that journey, how along the way Christian gets bogged down in quicksand named Discouragement; he meets a man named Mr. Worldly Wise who tries to divert him from his journey. On his journey he has to climb the Hill of Difficulty, and as he travels he is carrying the burden of his sin. The book is an allegory in which the Christian life is compared to a journey.

My guess is that many of us can identify with the journey that Christian, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, was taking. I think it's true for every one of us that in the journey of

our own lives, we have experienced getting bogged down in Discouragement. We know what it's like to hear other voices calling us to give up this way and try another way, an easier way, a prettier way, a way that promises all sorts of good things. We know what it's like to climb the Hill of Difficulty—hurts, loss, grief, sadness, confusion. We know about all that. And, like Pilgrim, we know what it's like to be weighed down by the burden of sin.

It's like it was for those travelers on the road to Emmaus that Easter afternoon. As they walk, you can almost see their shoulders drooping under the weight of disappointment, dashed hopes, unfulfilled dreams. We ourselves know what that's like.

But here's the promise that comes out of that Easter afternoon: Jesus joined them on the journey; he was with them on the way. The promise to us is just like the experience of those travelers on the road to Emmaus—Jesus is with us on our journey.

So what does it mean to say that Jesus is with us on our journey? It means the same thing to us as it did for those travelers that Easter afternoon. When they were walking by themselves, they were discouraged, uncertain about what the future held for them, without hope. Walking by themselves, they thought that it was all up to them. But when Jesus joined them, their discouragement turned to hope; their uncertainty about the future turned to confidence that their lives were in God's strong hands; the dark of their hopelessness turned to the light of promise. And they knew that their lives were in God's hands.

And so it is with us: Jesus brings light into the dark places of our lives; Jesus brings hope into those times of our lives when we are discouraged.

Let me go back again to *Pilgrim's Progress*. There's a scene in which the main character, Christian, is having to make his way across a rushing river, and it appears that the waters of the river may overwhelm him. But as he wades out into the deep, he calls back to a friend standing on the shore, "I have touched bottom, and it is sound." He knew that the solid foundation of faith in God would support him through whatever experiences life threw at him.

The promise that comes to us on our journey is that Jesus is with us. And if we will let him, he will help to carry the burdens that are weighing us down. The promise here is that we are not alone as we go along our life's journey, but that Jesus is with us. Thanks be to God.✠