

Another Miracle on the Emmaus Road

Luke 24:13-35

Sermon notes for the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Second Sunday of the Season of Easter, April 28, 2019

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Late on Easter afternoon, instead of a nap, Rachel and I went for a walk around nearby Hessel Park. Resurrection was in the air. Spring was springing, trees had budded, and the park was filled with people who seemed to be infinitely glad to be outdoors.

We walked around and around the park and I thought of Cleopas—no kidding. I thought about Cleopas and his friend walking on that road on that Sunday after the crucifixion with heavy feet. They were mourning the loss of Jesus and walking right beside them, having a conversation, was none other than Jesus, whom they did not recognize. They were still sore from that brutal, previous week. Now, even in new dawn and new day, they did not see the risen Lord walking right next to them.

My feet were heavy, too, but not with sadness. I was tired from Holy Week, yes. Holy Week is weighted with a special kind of profundity for Christians, and, as it does every single year, it wore me completely out. But I was not sad, like Cleopas. My feet were heavy simply because I was tired. We walked around Hessel Park in golden light with tired feet but a soaring spirit. Resurrection was in the air.

I reveled in watching people in the park. I didn't know any of these people, so I made lots of presumptions as I walked around watching them. Who was related to whom, I could only guess. But I wondered about their stories as I smiled at them and said hello.

A black man with a beautiful grey dog on a red leash walked with a white woman hand-in-hand; it was their children, I presumed, who walked ahead of them, looking back every now and then, then gleefully zooming ahead down the winding path.

An extended crowd of family, or church, or friends crowded around a picnic in the grassy field under the big trees. A father and son kicked a soccer ball. The grills were loaded with smoking food. I was full but the smell made me hungry anyway. They spoke another language—I guessed Spanish, but that was a guess. Their laughter was a language I've heard before, and in every tongue laughter means the same thing.

Children cavorted around on the playground swings and climbing bars. Adults sat on benches watching them. People wore short pants and short sleeves. Some had tattoos, some had pale skin longing for a little sun; some had skin the color of coffee, of caramel, of camellia flowers. Their hair was wild, tamed, yellow and red and brown and curled and straight and black. Sounds of laughter floated above birdsong. I smiled and nodded and said hello to everyone we walked past.

Everywhere I looked I saw Jesus.

Jesus playing with the children. Jesus working on his backhand on the tennis court. Jesus at the grill in the field flipping burgers. Jesus with a baby on his hip.

The LORD is risen. (He is risen, indeed.)

*"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,*

*But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."*

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

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I don't always take off my shoes, but Jesus is always around.

And that doesn't mean there's no suffering in the world. And that doesn't mean there's not work for us to do. But because Jesus is everywhere and *every common bush afire with God*, there is beauty and hope and—I'm choosing my words carefully here—**glory**. Creation is **redeemed**. And life here is kissed by **heaven**.

Jesus is with us, but sometimes life is still very hard. One man walking on the trail around Hessel Park in the opposite direction of me and Rachel looked troubled. As he made his circuit and we made ours, we passed several times. He looked like he was hurting, and hurting badly. While some sat on benches in the shade or in the sun in what seemed to me like a natural state of bliss, that man seemed confused and troubled, mumbling to himself, a little twitchy. The image of God was etched in the lines of his young face, but he looked like he was maybe hard to love. At night I might say he looked dangerous.

Jesus walks with us down every pathway, but some of those paths take us to the valley of the shadow of death. Even there, of course, there is beauty, but brokenness, too.

At the Interfaith Alliance of Champaign County, Ousmane Sawadogo, the Iman from the mosque and Islamic center, read a statement during our introductions. This was unusual. Our group gathers monthly to learn about ways to better serve our community and to celebrate our unity as children of God. Ousmane cleared his throat, looked at his cell phone, and read a statement that he wrote. It was written for his Christian brothers and sisters in light of the terrible Easter bombings in Sri Lanka. Trembling, he spoke of sorrow and of condolence and of love.

Ousmane is a faithful Muslim, but I heard and saw Jesus in his words and on his face on Wednesday. The transcendent God shows up in the most unexpected of places.

So does evil. Evil shows up, too. And when it does, we cannot simply look away and think happy thoughts. Like Jesus, we must confront evil with love and with grit.

Hannah Beech reported in the New York Times (Ap 25, 2019, NYT) that

"Zaharan Hashim, a radical Muslim preacher accused of masterminding the Easter Sunday attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka, never hid his hatred .

..

"He was influential, very attractive, very smart in his speeches, even though what he was saying about jihad was crazy," said Marzook Ahamed Lebbe, a former [Kattankudy] politician and member of a local Islamic federation. "We all underestimated him. We never thought he would do what he said."

But he did. Right before our eyes. Too many people did and said nothing while he preached hate against folk who were different than him.

Jesus walks with us everywhere. Jesus was blown to smithereens on Sunday in Sri Lanka even though here in Champaign he had just climbed out of the grave.

A local Methodist church is on the verge of splitting over the issue of how to welcome and love gay and lesbian members. The person who spoke to me about it said it's hard to be faithful.

I remembered my walk in Hessel Park days before. Jesus was there. And just as certainly, Jesus was with me and her as she communicated with tired eyes how hard it is sometimes to be the church.

Jesus walks with us into Rosecrantz as we alcohol face rehab for the fourth time.

Jesus walks with police officials and community leaders as they seek to reform policing.

Jesus walks with communities like Danville, Illinois, which seem beset by degrading poverty and senseless violence.

Jesus sits with a husband and wife of seventy years who sit together quietly in a nursing home, holding each other's hands, weeping.

Jesus walks with us no matter where our Emmaus Road takes us.

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When they arrived for the night, it appeared Jesus would walk on. But Cleopas said, "Stay with us. It's late. We're all tired and hungry." Jesus did stay with them, and at dinner, when he broke bread they recognized him. And later, as they talked about the journey home, they said "weren't our hearts burning within us on the road" as he talked to us about the scriptures. Jesus had been with them all along down that dusty Emmaus Road, but only in the breaking of bread did they recognize him. I think we know what Luke is saying here.

By God's grace, Jesus accepts our invitations to stay awhile and break bread with us—even us. Jesus is open to our hospitality, if we but offer it.

And, invited or not, by the amazing grace of God, Jesus shows up. In the picket lines of the state house. In the food lines in Havana. In the movie lines at the Cineplex. At the mission dinner hosted by the Refugee Center, where people hope to better support and befriend the 11.6% of the Urbana-Champaign community who are immigrants.

Every day is the day, and every journey is the journey where Jesus shows up. *Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.* That's the sort of thing he whispers to us. Jesus is smiling that smile of his, his way of showing encouragement to us, inviting us to be brave, to make a positive difference.

Glory, light, love, and grace all around. A redeemed creation. Heaven and earth holding hands. Jesus walking with us . . . *It's just another miracle on the Emmaus Road.*

Alleluia.

Amen.

Luke 24:13-35 13Now on that same day **two** of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about **seven miles** from Jerusalem, 14and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 18Then 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?" 19He 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, 20and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21But 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. 22Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23and 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. 24Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." 25Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" 27Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29But 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. 30When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" 33That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" 35Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.