



Part III—Finding Our Identity

LESSON NINE

When You Are Walking with Jesus: The Road to Emmaus



SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:13–35

MAIN IDEA

Jesus did not abandon his followers; we are not alone, for the Spirit of God is with us.

Opening Prayer

As the parent of the sick child said to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”⁴³ Forgive us, O Christ, when we are less than stellar followers of your word, and especially when we doubt your sovereignty and your ability to intervene on earth and in our lives. Keep calling us back to you and lead us to support faithfully the mission of the church worldwide and to work for justice and peace. Guide us as we celebrate our love for you, for you are the source of our joy. Amen.

SUMMARY

Sometimes we lose faith and begin to doubt. Mostly we believe, but it is hard to have faith in what we cannot see. After Jesus was crucified, doubt crept in among his followers. I imagine that some

said, “I do not want to say this, but what if what he told us is not going to happen?” At times you might feel out there all alone in the world, and your faith is tested. On the walk to Emmaus, two of Jesus’ followers were talking about the devastating things that had happened. While they were talking, Jesus came and started walking with them. Could it be that sometimes when we are devastated and despairing, and even doubting the presence of the Savior, Jesus is walking along with us? How do we recognize Christ?

LESSON

Two of Jesus’ followers were going to a village called Emmaus. Luke tells us it was a seven-mile journey from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened in the last few days; the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and the report from Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women, that Jesus had risen from the grave (Luke 22–24).

We assume, and our Christian tradition has taught us, that the two walking along were male disciples. Only one of the two is named in the passage: Cleopas. We have seen this name with a different spelling. John 19:25b reads, “Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” This could be two different names, or it could be the same. What if the two walking together were Clopas and Mary, his wife?

Sharon Ringe suggests that we might imagine a male–female missionary couple walking alongside Jesus, and the variation between the two forms of the name Cleopas and Clopas could be the same name, similar to the name shift immigrants experience as they move across different language contexts.⁴⁴

The two were very sad. And they were doubting Jesus and their own experiences. How do we know this? Luke 24:21 reads, “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” And in verse 11, after the disciples heard the testimony of the women, they did not believe them.

Have you ever wondered why these two were walking to Emmaus? Did they just need a long walk? Maybe they had to do something or go somewhere to forget about their troubles. Or did they just need to go outside and talk with one another? The scriptures do not say. Author Frederick Buechner suggested that Emmaus is the place we go in order to escape—the movies, a cocktail party, “whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die . . .”⁴⁵

As they talked with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they didn’t recognize him. I wonder why? Maybe there is something about a resurrected face or seeing the risen Lord in his glory. Or maybe being in the midst of despair makes it hard to look up into the face of God.

Jesus asked them, “What are you talking about as you walk along?” They looked at him, and Cleopas said, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (Luke 24:17–18). Didn’t you watch the news this morning? Don’t you listen to the *Jerusalem Times* podcast?

Recognizing Jesus

They were walking with Jesus, but they did not know it was him. This is a good metaphor for us today. The Spirit is with us, but we do not recognize that it is Christ. I think this happens to

44 Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 286–87.

45 Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 85.

us more than we realize. We do not always see that Christ is walking along the road with us.

Theologian Alan Culpepper writes, “The risen Lord meets us on the road to our Emmauses, in the ordinary places and experiences of our lives, and in the places to which we retreat when life is too much for us. The story warns us, however, that the Lord may come to us in unfamiliar guises, when we least expect him.”⁴⁶

Do you notice in this passage that the disciples did not seem to recognize Jesus until he was eating with them? A seminary professor of mine used to say that we do not really know another person until we eat with them. In the act of sharing their bread with a stranger, Jesus’ disciples recognized that the risen Lord was the companion traveling with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. It is funny that the disciples extended the invitation to Jesus, but Jesus is the host. Then it all clicks. And, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Similarly, when we share the sacrament of Holy Communion, we get to know Christ through the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

The two said to each other, “When he talked with us along the road and explained the scriptures to us, didn’t our hearts burn within us?” (24:32, paraphrase). This is the kind of experience where your heart sizzles, when your senses are stimulated, when you perceive that something big is happening. But sometimes, we only recognize spiritual moments after they have happened. Culpepper writes, “For this reason, we learn to treasure religious experiences in retrospect. . . . One of the secrets of a vigorous spirituality and a confident faith, therefore, is learning to appreciate

the importance of meeting God in the past as well as in the present.”⁴⁷

Activity

Reflect alone or with a partner about a time when you were aware of God’s presence with you in that particular moment, where you were able to bask in the presence of God.

The two travelers got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. Like an extended family, their testimony is shared with an extended group of male and female disciples, as well as other followers of Jesus. The eleven were there, and the women, and potentially Mary the wife of Clopas, as well as Clopas (or Cleopas). I love the idea of an extended family of disciples and colleagues, who study and speak about scripture and juxtapose it with their own personal experiences of Christ.

Women Witnesses

The experience of the women and their testimony was the most convincing proof of the resurrection. “I have seen the Lord,” Mary Magdalene said, and she told the disciples the things that Jesus said to her (John 20:18). According to Mark and Luke, her testimony was not initially effective, and this first woman preacher and the first witness to the resurrection was not heard or believed. “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). Robert Karris writes, “Their infidelity is contrasted with the fidelity of the women.”⁴⁸

46 R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 482.

47 Culpepper, “Luke.”

48 Karris, “Luke,” p. 720.

In Luke 24, preceding the road to Emmaus account, Mary Magdalene and the other women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Notice that many of the women are unnamed and referred to as “many other women” or “many others, who provided for them out of their resources.” This is first century proof that there were women in ministry from the beginning of Christianity. They played pivotal roles in spreading the good news of the gospel. Unfortunately, many of them are unnamed. But even so, we can honor their witness and ministry in the work that we carry on today.

Mary Magdalene is the person whom Jesus appeared to on Easter morning, as recorded in the Gospel of John, and she received the first apostolic commission in John to go and announce that Jesus is risen. She became the apostle to the apostles, as she was the one chosen by Jesus to tell the other disciples of the resurrection. As mentioned in an earlier lesson, Peter was named the Rock, and Mary was the Tower. Recent scholarship infers that both confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. The mission and the communion bread has been passed onto us, and it is we who are to proclaim that Christ is risen and share our bread, sometimes entertaining “angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2, KJV).

Activity

If you have experienced a time, with an extended group of believers, where you shared a meal together and had the scriptures opened to you, what did this feel like? This could have been at a church conference, a Presbyterian Women's gathering, or another event at your church where you were able to learn more about Jesus. Share with a partner why this was meaningful and how the community meal reinforced the experience.

Finding Our Identity in Jesus Christ

At the beginning of the passage, the co-journeymen were sad and doubting. The text points to a crisis of faith. Similarly, we believe in Jesus, have learned from and walked with him, but we, too, sometimes have doubts (even in small ways that we do not admit to others). We want to believe that what we were taught in church is true, but sometimes it is hard to believe.

Our faith requires some suspension of knowledge, to some degree, otherwise it would be fact and not faith. We mostly believe, but what happens when we do not? Some of us cling to Christ, God's people, scriptures, prayers and songs of the faith in times of crisis and chaos. And others, like a ship that is lost in a storm and battered against the waves, lose faith and doubt the very existence of God. The water pouring into the boat, the lack of good light, and our inability to have clear vision are, sometimes, too much for us. And our faith is not the only thing that is shattered—our identity is lost.

When we lose our identity as a follower of Christ, how do we find it again? Do we go on a long walk, like the two who walked to Emmaus? Do we hope Jesus will come walking our way and break bread with us? Do we ignore this period of weakened spirituality and hope our strong faith and sense of purpose will soon return?

Who are we if not children of God? What do we do if there is no purpose to our existence? How do we find our anchor when we are far from shore, being thrown across the deck of the ship, and nearly drowning in the waters of the storm? And, how quickly do we get to this place of hopelessness? For some, it is when they first spot the storm clouds that doubt begins to creep in. For others, it is somewhere in the middle of the crisis. And for others, they are fully engulfed in stormy seas before they question whether there is any chance of being saved.

I can imagine that it is easy to lose faith when the One who promised life and salvation is no longer physically present. It is hard to have faith in what you cannot see. When Jesus was crucified, doubt crept in among his followers.

Similarly, sometimes we feel like we are out there all alone, that we are facing challenge after challenge by ourselves. We feel like there ought to be someone fighting for us. We need someone to intervene on our behalf and guide us to move away from our own destructive thoughts.

The two travelers found that talking about the disastrous things that happened actually helped. Showing hospitality to a stranger opened their eyes to see Christ again. Is there a lesson here for us? While we like to believe we are self-made individuals, we need others to help navigate the difficult times. And sharing our time, talents, and possessions with others is a way to see Christ.

Della's Gift of Hospitality

At the church I served in Flint, Michigan, there was a woman named Della. She was diagnosed with cancer. She never talked to me about it, but I am certain there were times when she felt horrible and when she wanted to give up.

She was a part of our church from the time she was a child. This is not the experience of everyone but is the experience of some, to be part of the same faith community where you were baptized and go to church and serve as a deacon at the church where your mother is an elder. Both of these women served in leadership in Presbyterian Women's groups.

Della never gave up. If she lost her way or her identity as Christ's beloved, she bounced back, even if she was not feeling good. I will never forget her bringing food to the church for funeral

luncheons. This stuck with me because she had cancer, and no one expected her to provide hospitality. But as a daughter of the church's mission, she wanted to bring food to families who were grieving the loss of loved ones. We always knew she would be there to help out at these lunches when we needed her. Like the extended group of believers in this passage, while she was on her Emmaus road, she recognized Jesus in the sharing of bread. We too, can recognize, once again, that Jesus is the Messiah after all!

Jesus said, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). Like Mary and the disciples, we are to "go and tell" others about the joys of the gospel. The proof of Christ's resurrection is in the daily testimony of the faithful, in you and in me, in our sharing the good news that Christ has risen from the grave, and that we have been given the gift of life eternal. Christ lives, and his message and gospel continue through us. And every so often the risen Christ comes to us when we least expect him.

Jesus did not abandon his followers. We were sent what the Creator promised. Jesus' followers were given the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete. We are not alone, for the Spirit of God is with us.⁴⁹

Closing Prayer

Redeeming Christ, thank you for calling us by name and making us your own. When we forget that we are part of your family, help us to reclaim our identity, found in you. Open our eyes that we may recognize you. Open our hearts that we may serve you with joy. Guide us to participate in your reign in the world, for you pave the way for us to follow you. Amen.

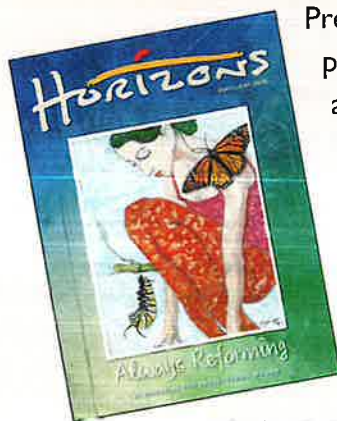
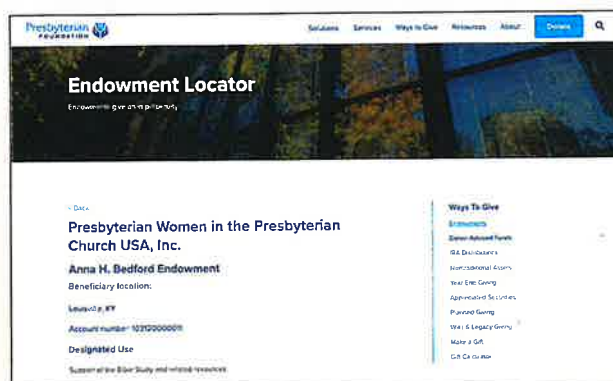
49 See John 14:25-26.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you, on an ordinary day, suddenly looked up or experienced something that let you know that God is here? If so, describe your experience.
2. If you have experienced sharing hospitality with strangers and entertaining angels without knowing it, how did this happen?
3. Have you experienced a crisis of faith, where you doubted God's ability to intervene in your life while you were in challenging circumstances? If so, describe how this felt.
4. What does it change for you to imagine that instead of two male followers walking to Emmaus that there may have been, as theologian Sharon Ringe suggests, a male-female missionary couple walking alongside Jesus?
5. If it is possible that your identity as a follower of Christ is not as strong as it once was? What will you do so that others see you as Christ's child serving in the world?
6. Do you notice how Mary Magdalene is often present in the scriptures, even when she and other women are merely being referenced as part of a larger narrative? The women disciples do big things but are not always believed by the disciples. Why is this?

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Presbyterian women can “jump in” to increase the endowment’s corpus and provide a reliable stream of funding for this purpose. Read the story of Anna and Jerry Bedford and their generous gift to Presbyterian Women in the March/April 2020 *Horizons* or visit presbyterianwomen.org/giving-funding.

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