

July 1, 2018



Sacraments and Sacred Moments:

“RECOGNIZING JESUS”

(Communion)

Luke 24:13-35

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I was looking at an old *Kudzu* comic strip the other day. The main character, a southern preacher named the Rev. Will B. Dunn, usually has a way of putting things into perspective for me. If nothing else, he often makes me laugh in the midst of the difficulties of life. In this particular segment, Rev. Dunn is featured on the television screen standing in front of a weather map of the United States, giving the daily forecast. However, it’s not the type of forecast you might expect. Instead, he’s ready to give a spiritual forecast for the town of Bypass, North Carolina and the surrounding areas.

Rev. Dunn says, “The spiritual outlook for the region: partly carnal...with widespread doubt, despair, and listlessness...mood swings expected into the early afternoon...with an eighty percent chance of acting out by the weekend!”¹

As I read our scripture lesson for this past week, I wondered if this would have been the forecast on the afternoon of that first Easter Sunday as two of the disciples headed from Jerusalem up the road to the nearby town of Emmaus. It was only about a seven-mile journey from Jerusalem so that it could be completed in an afternoon by foot.

Luke doesn’t seem to tell us why these two disciples were headed out of town towards Emmaus. We’re left to make our inferences. As the two are walking together, they strike up a conversation on the way about their experiences over the past few days. When Jesus appears among them, they fail to recognize him. He appears to be a stranger on the way. So Jesus asks the two what they were talking about. Luke tells us that “They stood still, looking sad.” Jesus’ question seems to stop them in their tracks.

One of the two, named “Cleopas,” is a little dumfounded that this stranger that they’ve just met has no idea what has happened in Jerusalem over the last few days. News should travel fast in their oral news culture. Surely you couldn’t be this close to Jerusalem and not have heard about what happened to Jesus in the preceding days. If everyone did not know about the guy who went about doing all kinds of good, surely they would have heard news of the crucifixions that had taken place.

The Roman punishment of crucifixion was a very public punishment meant to strike fear into the hearts of everyone in order to dissuade others from similar crimes. Jesus was crucified at the top of a hill so that anyone else who dared to disturb the *Pax Romana*, or the Roman Peace, would see and think twice before doing so. I'm guessing that these two disciples felt as if everyone should have known what happened by now.

Jesus, however, invites the two to tell him more, asking, "What things?" When they finally speak, you can almost sense the depth of their sadness. "Doubt, despair, and listlessness..." seems to have enveloped these two on their journey to Emmaus that afternoon. Jesus asked one brief question, "What things?" and suddenly the emotions flow out over the next several verses of the story.

Moment by moment, they recount the story of Jesus' final days. Notice that they describe him as a "prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people."² On the other hand, Alan Culpepper points out in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary that they don't use words like "Messiah," "Christ," "Son of God," or "Son of Man" which Luke, the gospel writer, uses elsewhere to describe Jesus.³ Sure he was a "prophet," but wasn't he so much more as well?

Perhaps, but not now—at least not in their minds. As great as Jesus may have been, he had been handed over, was condemned to death, and crucified. Listen to their words: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."⁴

"Doubt, despair, and listlessness..." had set in for these two as they headed out of town. They were devastated at the loss of Jesus. They had placed all their hope in him, but now those hopes were crushed. There would be no change of the status quo. The Romans would still rule the empire and their people would still be treated as if they were less than human.

To pour even more salt into their gaping emotional and spiritual wounds, some of the women from their group had gone to Jesus' tomb early that morning to prepare his body for burial, only to discover that his body was not there. They came back and shared a story of angels telling them that he was alive, but when several of the men from their midst went to see the news for themselves, the tomb was empty. Even worse, they didn't see Jesus or the angels.⁵

"Doubt, despair, and listlessness..." What else could these two disciples feel as they traveled away from the city of Jerusalem through the countryside to Emmaus? They "had hoped" that Jesus would be the one to make a difference for them. They "had hoped" that Jesus could turn their world upside down. They "had hoped" that Jesus would set them free from the oppression of the Roman empire. But not now! Now, there was no hope left in them! They weren't buying the stories that might keep hope alive as they headed out of town that day.

I don't know about you, but there is a deep heaviness to this part of the story that follows the good news we normally hear in the Easter message in the preceding verses. I wonder if knowing all of the story causes us simply to gloss over this difficult moment for these two as they travel along the road to Emmaus, leaving town in "doubt, despair, and listlessness."

Friends, have you ever been on the Emmaus Road? I don't mean the one in Israel. I mean the road that sometimes finds you in life when you are feeling helpless and in a moment of despair. It's that road you travel when you once "had hoped" for something better but life somehow

brought a different outcome. The Emmaus Road is that dusty road with no water and no signs of life or hope that leaves you feeling the fullness of “doubt, despair and listlessness.”

The other day, I found myself listening to the news while I was in the car running errands. When I was younger, I used to watch the late night news on the television with my grandfather on most nights. Following the late night news, we had a moment to debrief, vent, share our hopes, and move on.

Times, however, have changed now as we have the ability to get our news all day, every day. While I don't watch it on television as much, I often listen to a news station on the radio in the car. In addition, I go to a few websites to quickly read the articles that keep me informed about what's going on in our world. I wonder if this tends to take more time and energy from me than watching the late night news?

On that particular day, there were several stories about the many immigrant children who are being separated from their parents as the nation is caught up in border debates. Of course, many folks were weighing in with their thoughts about immigration, national security, and even a few giving religious advice. Yet all I could find myself thinking about were the experiences of young children who were separated from their parents.

Those of you who know me know that my heart is touched when kids cry because I'm holding them at baptism. They know the safety of their parents' arms. At their baptism, there's a clergyperson whom they often do not know taking them to pour water on their heads. On any given Sunday, the best I can do is make sure that the water is at least warm and quickly get them back into the arms of their parents.

The other day, however, as I sat there listening to the news, my heart started breaking. I thought about the emotional pain of so many children and their parents who, because of language barriers and so much more, don't know if or when they'll ever see one another again.

Friends, I know that we might have different views on immigration and a whole host of other topics. I know that we won't always agree on everything, but surely in a land of prosperity and generosity, we must be able to find some other way to address our issues about immigration and national security without causing great harm to those who are most innocent and vulnerable among us.

As we prepare to celebrate the anniversary of a great nation, can it be that our fears have moved us to this point of doubt and despair where we fail to trust one another even when it comes to how we might best care for children? Has God abandoned us to this mess that we've made for ourselves that impacts the lives of the ones whom Jesus promoted from the “least of these” to the “greatest”?

In their moment of despair, Jesus meets the disciples on the Emmaus Road as they turned away from Jerusalem and their hopes of a better day. After listening to their greatest hurts, he unpacks the scriptures for them. Even still, they struggle to see, but they urge him to stay with them for the night.

That night, as they gathered together around a table for an evening meal, Jesus took bread. It was the common bread that they shared at mealtimes. He blessed it and broke it as he had done only the night before he had died. Then he gave it to them. And as he did, Luke tells us that “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”⁶

I’m almost troubled that as soon as the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, he disappeared. I can only guess how many more questions they might have had for him. I know that I would have. Luke says, however, that “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.”

Don’t you remember, friends? They had begged Jesus to stay because it was getting late. They were most likely concerned about his safety in the darkest part of the night. Yet, upon recognizing him, they are moved to journey through whatever darkness was in front of them to bring to the others the same spiritual release they had experienced. They could stay in Emmaus no longer. They had to go back to Jerusalem.

Today, we gather around this table yet again to share in the sacrament of holy communion. We gather as many, with plenty of differences, yet join our hearts as one in the power of One who has made us one.

Perhaps in the breaking of bread in this place, we might recognize Jesus in our midst and in those around us who are struggling along an Emmaus Road of “doubt, despair, and listlessness,” whether they be by our own creation or the struggles that life sometimes brings. When we do, might we arise to walk down the long, dark road to Jerusalem to bring the light and hope of the good news with others.

It’s at the table that we catch a glimpse of Jesus who reframes the story for us as we find new life. It’s at the table that we remember who we are and whose we are. It’s at the table that we learn to live in the One who brings us life. And just as soon as we recognize him, he gets up from the table that we might be moved back to our Jerusalems, to our most difficult places, to bring hope and life.

So today, as we gather around the table again, perhaps the Christ that we discover at this table with broken bread and shared cup might just change the spiritual forecast of the world around us. Might we learn anew to live in the hope of resurrection and new life that Christ brings to our world so as to create a better nation and a better world for all.

¹ <https://joshreads.com/category/kudzu/page/4/>

² Luke 24:19, NRSV.

³ Culpepper, R. Alan. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IX. Ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 477.

⁴ Luke 24:21, NRSV.

⁵ Luke 24:22-24.

⁶ Luke 24:31, NRSV.