

“When Love Comes to Town”

Luke 24:13-35

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Lake Forest, Illinois

The 2<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter

It is only in the gospel of Luke where we find this unique post-resurrection story of two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. One, we learn, is named Cleopas and the other disciple, because no name is recorded, we might assume is a woman—as women are often unnamed in scripture. Further, because Cleopas and his companion invite the stranger into their home, it is reasonable to assume it is probably Cleopas and his wife who are walking along the road that day from Jerusalem to Emmaus grieving together the loss of their messiah, when suddenly they are joined by this stranger. Curiously, modern scholars and archeologists have yet to conclusively confirm the existence of any particular town or place in that region called Emmaus. This has left some to conjecture that Luke may have intended that this story, although told in a particular time and place, was meant to be read and embraced by disciples in every time and place. The story, I believe, speaks to us on our journeys of life, on our particular journeys to places where we too grieve the loss of hope.

Last week, in her Easter morning sermon, Christine acknowledged what many of us experience, but most of us are too timid to admit—particularly here in the midst of a community of faith: the reality that all of us have doubts. We know how it feels, like those two disciples, to lose hope for they said to one another, “We had hoped that he would redeem Israel.” “We had hoped he would save us.” “We had hoped that he was the messiah.” Does that lament sound familiar? Have you had that lament as well? We had hoped that he would save us. We had hoped our faith in him would save us from our addictions and our anxieties and our anger. We had hoped that our faith in him would heal our broken hearts and redeem our broken dreams. We had hoped that our faith in the Prince of Peace would stop war and violence in the world around us and lift up the broken hearted. Oh, we had hoped that he was the messiah.

Although Jesus patiently and compassionately listens to their laments he then responds with a gentle rebuke, saying “Oh you of little faith,” reminding us of his rebuke to Peter who tried to walk out on the water and begins to sink in the waves. Jesus immediately catches him saying, “Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Back on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens the scriptures and tells the two disciples their story, *our story*, again, about a God who has created them, who loves them, who has redeemed them from their sin and brokenness and loves them still.

Even then, still not quite getting it, still not quite understanding, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus extend the very practices of generosity and hospitality that they had been taught by the messiah, even extending hospitality to the least of these, to this stranger on the road. The stranger joins them for a meal and then the guest at the table becomes the host, for he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and he gives it to them. Sharing a meal, sharing his very self with them. In so doing, their eyes are opened and they realize who it is that is in their midst, the messiah, the one who has come to save them. The road of despair that they had walked just a few moments ago is now transformed into a road of joy and hope as they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what they have seen and heard. Alleluia, he has risen indeed!

Several years ago, after teaching high school in Seattle, Washington, I felt a nudge from God to sign up for a year of mission service, to work as a youth and community worker in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Although I confess I went as much out of a sense of adventure as I did out of any real sense of calling. I thought I would take full advantage of the opportunity to be overseas for a year, so I made up my mind that before my mission service started, I would arrive in Ireland three weeks early. I packed my touring bicycle in a box and when I got to Belfast I dropped my bags off in the apartment where I would be living, I assembled my bike, put my pannier bags on the back and I was set to go. I took off on a three week cycling tour through the British Isles. I had mapped out my course very carefully, booking rooms in youth hostiles. It was going to be an amazing trip. I hopped on my

bike and I began by cycling from Belfast south through the Irish countryside to the beautiful city of Dublin. That's where things began to take an unexpected turn.

A few weeks before I went to Belfast, I was at a family reunion in Michigan and I met one of my mother's second cousins. She said to me that she had a daughter, Carrie Anne (who I guess was my third cousin???) who was in Dublin that summer on a college summer abroad program and asked if I would stop in Dublin and visit her. So, when I got to Dublin I cycled my way into the city to Trinity College and I found Carrie Anne and her boyfriend Scott. I had never met them before, but we chit-chatted a bit and they were excited to hear about my trip. In fact, they said, "Hey, we were thinking about cycling around the British Isles too, could we join you?" I was not thrilled about this idea, but Carrie Anne was family—I guess—so I said, "Well, I got this trip mapped out, if you don't mind accompanying me."

They said: "Oh yeah, safety in numbers...and...we'll save money."

I said, "Okay, so tomorrow morning I'll be down at the pier for the early ferry across the Irish Sea to Holyhead and Wales and we'll continue our journey from there. Just meet me at the pier."

I spent the night at the youth hostile, got up early, made my way down to the pier and sure enough, there was Carrie Anne and Scott waiting for me. They had apparently borrowed bicycles from some friend of theirs in Dublin. They were riding these giant mountain bikes with big knobby tires and they were wearing these huge backpacks filled with who knows what. They did not seem prepared for the journey ahead. We got on the ferry and made our way over to Wales, where we disembarked and began biking across the Welsh countryside. I quickly realized this was not going to work out as well as I had hoped. Their bikes were not well equipped, they had too much stuff with them, we stopped a couple times along the road to unload some of the things in their backpacks: they had hiking boots and hard back books to read at the youth hostile; ridiculous things that no one should ever have on a biking tour. We started to unpack things, but they just were not up to the task. They were not ready for this kind of a tour, so as the afternoon wore on we would

increasingly find ourselves in a situation where I would cycle to the top of a hill and wait and they would get off their bikes at the bottom and push up the hill. This went on for several hours and the sun began to set and it began to rain. I found myself at the top of a hill realizing we were not going to make it to the youth hostile I had booked that night, and I had no plan B. As I sat at the top of the hill, looking down about a quarter-mile at Carrie Anne and Scott pushing their bikes up; I found myself somewhat desperately, maybe even involuntarily, uttering a little prayer, “God, I need some help.”

Then, off in the distance I saw a small figure, who in comparison to Carrie Anne and Scott, seemed to be traveling at warp speed. He zipped past them up the hill, zipped passed me, down the hill and up the next on the countryside beyond us. Then I saw that he stopped, he got off his bike, stared at me, scratched his head and after pausing for a moment, got back on his bike came down the hill, back up the other side to me and got off and said, “You’re not from around here are you?”

“No,” I said, “I am an American.”

He looked down the hill at Carrie Ann and Scott pushing their bikes up the hill

“Are they with you?”

“Yea, they’re...they’re family.”

“Where are you going?”

“Well, I booked a room up ahead at the youth hostile.”

He said, “You’re not going to make it.”

I said, “Yea, I know.”

“What are you going to do?”

I said, “Honestly, I have no idea.”

He paused for a moment, thinking about the situation, then he said, “Look, it’s not much, but my wife and I live in a small cottage just up ahead in a little village, we don’t have extra beds but you can sleep on the floor. We don’t have extra food, but we can give you some beans and toast.”

Immediately red flags went up in my mind: axe murderer, axe murderer, axe murderer! But then a gentle voice, “Hey...hey...you asked for help! Here’s help.”

So when Carrie Anne and Scott got to the top of the hill, I said this gentleman has offered and they said YES before I had even finished my sentence. Off we went to Andrew’s house. We learned that night that Andrew was a new member of the Royal Air Force in training and he and his wife had just moved into this little village. It was true—they had a small space and we slept on the floor that night. Beans and toast may not sound like much now, but it was a gourmet meal that evening.

The next morning, we got up and Andrew said, “Excuse me, where is it that you were heading?” I told him on the map where we were going, and he said, “You know, between here and there, there is a bridge out and a long detour. You wouldn’t have made it yesterday anyway.”

Oh you of little faith, Jesus says, why did you doubt? That summer, I had believed that I was putting my mission, my ministry on hold so that I could take this little trip and be part of a great adventure. In the midst of it, I was reminded that it is not up to me or to us to ever determine when and where mission and ministry will take place. Along this road to an unknown village, God opened my eyes and taught me important things that day about the ministry and mission I would be part of, not only that year but that I was called to be part of the rest of my life. Sharing good news and receiving good news is an all day, every day kind of call. True ministry takes place when we have the courage to share good news with others, even when the circumstances around us seem to betray the very hope that we are proclaiming. And true ministry takes place when we are humble enough to receive good news from others and, thereby, allow them to practice ministry with us.

Along the paths of our lives, there are times when we lose hope. This morning, we are reminded through the testimony of these disciples from Emmaus, that hope is walking right beside us and our lives are never the same

again. Because that's what happens...that's what happens when we encounter the risen Christ. That's what happens when the bread is broken and shared. That's what happens when our eyes are opened. That's what happens when love comes to town.

Amen.