

Road trip: Luke 24:13-35

by [Amy B. Hunter](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

The storyteller weaves it all together—an unknown traveler named Cleopas and his companion; the resurrected Jesus, who is present but in an unrecognized, mysterious fashion; the travelers' sudden recognition of Jesus; and his sudden disappearance. I have always loved the story, but have never understood why this particular resurrection appearance is so much richer in detail than those in other accounts.

This story seems to be a particular favorite of clergy. For ten years I served as a consultant for the pastoral search process in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Nearly every ministerial candidate identified Emmaus as a favorite scripture passage. They spoke of the two travelers who are blind to the presence and person of Jesus until he sets their hearts burning and opens their eyes with the breaking of the bread. Jesus here is a “faithful minister of God’s word and sacraments,” in the words of an Anglican prayer for ordained ministers.

One Sunday I heard a preacher claim that the point of the Emmaus story is that we can recognize Jesus *only* in the broken bread. I hadn’t become an Episcopalian until I was in my 20s, so my inner Presbyterian child began to mutter, “And what about their hearts burning when they heard the word?” I was certain that I was missing some deep Anglican truth, so I sought out a fellow parishioner with a strong Anglo-Catholic bent, knowing that she would set me straight. I found her in the kitchen opening and slamming the cabinet doors. I ignored her frustration and asked her to explain how we find Jesus only in the Eucharist. She answered me between gritted teeth: “That’s just baloney! It’s all about power. If Jesus is only in the bread, then the priest is the only one who can dole him out, as it were.”

So how do we walk the road to Emmaus? There is no doubt that the story directs us to the church, where we may encounter Jesus in the word and the sacraments. But not to “the church” that’s equated with the institution and Sunday worship. We are directed instead to the church that meets a very ordinary world, a world marked by human loss and human hospitality.

We never hear of Cleopas again after this passage, and we never learn the name of his companion. They are not important people. They are “ordinary” people who have had the grand adventure of following Jesus and his disciples. But now that is over, and they are walking back home.

With Jesus’ death they have lost their faith and their hope. They are not looking for him; in fact, they don’t even recognize him when he joins them. Yet he chooses this place of loss to meet them. When he asks about their sorrow, they are so absorbed in that grief that they cannot believe that this person doesn’t know about their experience. They tell Jesus the story of his own ministry and death, and add the dubious news of his resurrection.

For them the story is over. Their hopes have proven empty, and they are defeated. But then Jesus tells the story back to them, this time through the lens of their own faith tradition and scriptures. “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe . . .” The story is not about them and their disappointment, he says. It is about life, the universe and everything in it.

They respond to Jesus with hospitality, engaging him in conversation and expressing concern for him when he appears to be traveling beyond their stopping point. “The day is over,” they insist. “It’s getting dark. Come eat with us and rest and be safe.” At supper when Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives them the bread, they recognize him, then almost immediately lose him again as he vanishes. But the experience on the road and at table has transformed them, and they immediately return to Jerusalem to find the disciples and the rest of their group.

What makes the story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. I can understand Jesus appearing to the remaining 11 disciples, to the faithful women who followed him, and even to Paul—all very practical appearances in terms of establishing the church and its mission. But Cleopas and his companion are nobodies who have no idea what God might be doing. They could be any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road, the road each of us is on every day. This is what sets this story apart from other accounts of Jesus’ Easter appearances.

Yes, the story resonates with a sense of the church and its mission and of the tremendous power of the word and the sacraments to connect us with the presence of God. But its image is of God and a church that walk alongside human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope. Emmaus invites us to expect God to

find us. Emmaus challenges us to see that it isn't our unshakable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship.

"Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love" (The Book of Common Prayer).