

EMMAUS THEN AND NOW

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Grace Church in New York
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They 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?" (Luke 24:32)

A long time ago, in a state far, far away, I was a struggling high school student, not thriving academically, athletically, or socially. I know – I know – you look at me now in these form-fitting vestments, with my full head of hair that the camera makes even thicker, and you wonder: how could it be? But it's true. My high school career was remarkable only for how invisible I was. For example, every year as Valentine's Day approached, students could buy carnations for their secret sweethearts. Then on Valentine's Day itself the carnations would arrive in homeroom, and everyone was supposed to wear the flowers they had received. The popular kids went through the day looking like shrubbery in full bloom. As for me and my ilk, it was just another day of obscurity.

One time, however, Lady Fortune plucked me from anonymity and gave me a turn in the sun with the beautiful people. Every year the student pep squad (or whatever it was called) would sponsor something called Spinster Week. The gist of Spinster Week was archaic by today's standards. What happened was that the fixed rules of engagement would be reversed, and the girls would ask out the boys. Now by chance I had a theater class, and in that class was a smoking-hot cheerleader. Even better, she and I wound up thrust on the stage together to do a few improvisational skits. Surprisingly, these went well – so well, in fact, that she asked me to be her date for Spinster Week. Of course I said yes, all the while trying to maintain my cool as if this sort of thing happened to me every day. But the fact is, I was ready to burst with uncontainable joy. Suddenly everything and everyone looked different. In a flash my entire outlook on life changed. How could I even begin to share the news with my friends and family? No one would believe me. I could hardly believe it myself. You may be wondering how it all played out when Spinster Week finally arrived. Ah, you will have to stay tuned for the whole sermon if you really want to know.

This week as I read and reread St. Luke's story of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, I began recalling and even reliving my surprising encounter with joy all those years ago. It was the afternoon of the first Easter Day. Luke describes the two travelers as disciples of Jesus. One was named Cleopas, the other is anonymous. Luke doesn't give us any more clues to their identity, but he does imply that they were close to Jesus and the other disciples during the previous week in Jerusalem. As did everyone around Jesus who was interested and even invested in his ministry, they *had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel*. They had hoped that he was God's long-awaited Messiah, who would not only redeem Israel, but also inaugurate the new creation. God's promise was that when the Messiah came, the ways of earth would begin to realign themselves with the ways of heaven. According to the prophet Isaiah (11:6f), the wolf would dwell with the lamb. The leopard would lie down with the kid, and the calf, and the lion. A little child would lead them all, and the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord. All of these hopes were riding on Jesus, but now the mood of the two travelers was one of despair. The previous Friday it had all come to a devastating end when the Romans crucified Jesus as an enemy of the state.

You heard that as the two took their dashed hopes along the road – home to Emmaus, back to where they started – Jesus himself drew near and walked with them. Oddly, they didn't recognize Jesus. They took him to be another traveler – a stranger who joined in their conversation.

The stranger seemed to know quite a bit about the prophecies foretelling the Messiah. As Luke describes: *Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.* When at last they reached Emmaus the two disciples, still not recognizing Jesus, bid him to stay with them. Evening was at hand. It was getting dark and dangerous. Safely inside, at the table together, Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup. When he did, the two disciples finally recognized him. In that moment Jesus vanished from their sight. Where did he go? I've never known what to make of it, but he vanished from their sight just as mysteriously as he drew near them on the road.

Nevertheless, here is when the experience of an uncontainable joy welled up in them. *They 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?"* They realized that all the promises of God – for them as individuals and for the whole created order – were true in Jesus. They arose and ran all the way back to Jerusalem, where they found the other disciples and learned that the experience of meeting the risen Jesus wasn't a figment of their imaginations. The Jerusalem disciples were saying, "The Lord has risen, indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Still today we speak the Easter greeting. "The Lord is risen, indeed," we proclaim in the faith that through Jesus death is defeated, and God is making the whole creation new.

No matter how many commentaries you might read on the Gospel of Luke, the Road to Emmaus is invariably praised as a lovely story, a beautiful story. But is it true? Does beauty necessarily equate with truth? The Resurrection of Jesus is something that is supposed to catch up all of creation, but as we look at the world right now we have to wonder about the contradiction. We need not rehearse the details of all the devastation the coronavirus is leaving in its wake. But it is incumbent upon us to ask how the reality we perceive, how this peculiar time we are enduring squares with the Easter faith. Where is God?

Recently in *The New York Times* I read an interesting review of a new book by the astrophysicist David Lindley entitled, *The Dream Universe: How Fundamental Physics Lost its Way*.¹ Mind you now, I have only read the review and not the book itself. Nevertheless, Lindley laments a trend amongst 20th and 21st theoretical physicists to choose beauty over truth. "It is more important to have beauty in one's equations than to have them fit an experiment," wrote Paul Dirac in 1963. "My work always tried to unite the truth with the beautiful, and when I had to choose one or the other, I usually chose the beautiful," wrote another physicist, Hermann Weyl. Thus today many physicists, finding no evidence of God and even the notion of God to be deeply unattractive, propose an alternate theory of the universe that they see as beautiful, even if it fits no experiment. To explain how we can have a creation without a Creator, they have introduced the concept of the multiverse. Ours is just one of an infinite number of universes that eternally and spontaneously spark into existence and then go dark again. I suppose beauty is in the eye of the beholder. To me, the idea of the multiverse is more – not less – outlandish than the notion of God, the maker of heaven and earth. It raises more questions than it answers, and is untestable.

Let's bring it back to earth. What does all this have to do with the little seven-mile stretch of road between Jerusalem and Emmaus? Again, it's a beautiful story. But can it be true that the risen Jesus really and substantially met the two travelers? Some Biblical scholars will say it can't be true in a bodily, physical sense. We all know that such things don't happen. The story is metaphorical. It is meant to illustrate how the Spirit of Jesus always goes with us. It outlines a pattern of Christian practice. Thus, the prolific New Testament professor, John Dominic Crossan has written, "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens."² Clearly, Crossan wants to be provocative and profound, but the simple question is: if it *never* happened, how could it *ever* happen? It seems to me that a clear precedent would be necessary to spark any ongoing pattern. In this case, it has to be true or it isn't beautiful. It has to fit the experiment of real life or it's meaningless – even dangerous. It would be like my saying that back in high school, the cheerleader

never did ask me to be her Spinster Week date. I imagined the whole thing, but I found the notion so attractive that it caused me great joy, and I began to act as if it were true. Well, that sort of behavior can get you into a whole lot of trouble. It is to live in the Dream Universe, not the real world of space and time. So I would amend Crossan's quote to say: "Emmaus always happens because it happened." Here we don't have to choose between truth and beauty. They have met together. Jesus really did appear to the two travelers, and Simon Peter, and Thomas, and others. Only then does their unbridled joy and ongoing practice make any sense.

Emmaus happened. Even though the physical appearances of the risen Jesus ceased after forty days, the disciples discovered it was still possible to experience his presence. So yes, Emmaus always happens. What is the pattern that led again and again to the opening of their eyes, and the sustaining of their joy? Do we dare try the experiment to see if it fits real life? Allow me to suggest four practices inherent in the story. In the interest of time I will file them by title. First, two of them were walking and talking together. Jesus makes himself known to us when, with another person, we engage in honest discussion, questioning, exchange of opinion, and sacred wondering about who God is, who we are, and what it all might mean. Second, the two travelers met Jesus because they welcomed the stranger, not only along the road, but at the end of the road. *Stay with us*, they said. Third, the two travelers on the road to Emmaus met Jesus because they opened themselves to the Scriptures. *And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself*. Jesus makes himself known through the Bible and our study of it.

Fourth and finally, the two travelers opened their eyes to Jesus when he took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. He became known to them in the breaking of the bread. It was the simple action that Jesus commanded his followers to do in remembrance of him. This is my Body. This is my Blood. Obviously, our communion and fellowship is impaired as we shelter in place. But I long for the day when it is safe again to break the bread and pass the cup at this table here in Grace Church with all of you physically present. It will be a day of rejoicing. It will be a foretaste of the joy before the angels of God in heaven.

Now that you've hung in till the end of the sermon it's only fair that I tell you what happened during Spinster Week back in high school. It was a long time ago, in a state far, far away. But I can attest that the cheerleader really did ask me to be her date. It was not the figment of my imagination that my envious friends tried to convince me it was. It was to be a week of pre-arranged activities, something every day culminating in a big dance on Saturday night. As the week went on it was becoming clear that we were not a match made in heaven. I was probably in over my head with the beautiful people. Then at the dance on Saturday night the lovely cheerleader vanished from my sight for most of the evening. Where did she go? I've never known what to make of it, other than to conclude that the joy had an end, as all earthly joys do.

Nevertheless, in retrospect it was all worth it because the initial experience of joy itself set the precedent and pointed me forward. Such incomplete glimmers of joy on earth foreshadow and press on to their fulfillment in heaven. The experience gave me a foretaste of the spark I would expect to find – what I would need to find – in a future relationship. It gave me a fleeting glimpse of the deep, sustained, ongoing joy that God promises us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Emmaus happened. Emmaus always happens. And thus we will sing this morning, "For Christ the Lord is risen, our joy that hath no end."

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¹ The review is by Jim Al-Khalili. Published March 17, 2020. Updated April 21, 2020.

² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, p. 197.