

Luke 24
The Road to Emmaus

Movie producer Woody Allen once gave the commencement address
at Yale University.

He said to his audience:

“Our civilization stands at a crossroads.
Down one road is despondency and despair.
Down the other road is total annihilation.
I hope we take the right road.”

Allen was obviously trying to be funny, but his words reflect
the despair and pessimism of our age.

And on a personal level,
the despair, doubt, discouragement and even death,
that can seep into our lives and suffocate our hope.

The two travelers on the road to Emmaus were
downhearted and disillusioned.

The man that they had loved and followed and believed in
had died a cruel and degrading death on a cross.

It's hard for us to imagine the total repugnance and rejection there was
in the first century associated with death by the cross.

The oldest crucifix we know of is dated from the third century –
found in the ruins of the Roman imperial district.

The crucifix had the head of a donkey with the sarcastic inscription
"Alexemanos worships his God" inscribed underneath.

The artifact shows that the cross that binds our life to Christ,
his death and resurrection,
our death to self and new life in Him,
the cross that has become an accepted symbol of our religious faith
was more like a bad joke.

As Paul wrote “a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles.”

The cross was not a symbol of love and victory but a harsh, cruel fact.

It would never have occurred to Jews, Greeks, or Romans
to link a positive religious meaning with the symbol of the cross –
the fate of outlaws, thieves, and failed leaders of lost causes.

The cross struck an educated Greek as barbaric folly,
a Roman citizen as sheer disgrace, and a devout Jew as God's curse.

“We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”,
Cleopas said to the stranger who walked along with them.
Past tense: we had hoped but not anymore.

Can you identify with the feelings of these two disciples in any way?
The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus was seven miles long.
Have you ever walked that seven mile road?

The hallway from the waiting room to the hospital room
can seem seven miles long.
The walk from the courtroom to your car after the divorce hearing
can seem seven miles long.
When you are battling depression, the walk from your bed to the front door
of your house can seem seven miles long.

The road to Emmaus must have seemed like 7,000 miles long
to the two followers of Jesus.
There were exit signs along the road but each one began with the letter ‘D’:
“disappointment, doubt, defeat, discouragement, despair.”

As the two men walked along, the stranger asked them
“What are you discussing as you walk along?”
And so they pour out their whole story to this man who they do not
recognize but who must have seemed like a good listener.
They told the stranger all about their hopes and disappointments.

The last thing they needed was a brisk talk
being told to ‘cheer up’ or ‘snap out of it’.
The stranger simply provided a listening ear.
And the stranger walked with them.
He didn't leave them in the hopes of finding other travelers
who might be better company or more useful to him.

Isn't that a beautiful picture?

Jesus walking along the road from Jerusalem,
the city where he had walked the road to Golgotha,
now walking with his despondent and confused disciples.

They are in a downward spiral
but Jesus is about to open up the Scriptures to them
and break bread with them
and their hope will be revived.

Speaking of downward spirals and renewed hope,
Ronald Pinkerton had a near accident while hang gliding.
He had launched his hang glider and had been forcefully
lifted by the wind 4,200 feet into the air.

As he was descending, he was suddenly hit by a powerful new blast of air
that sent his hang glider plummeting straight toward the ground.

“I was falling at an alarming rate. Trapped in an airborne riptide.
I was going to crash. Then I saw him – a red-tailed hawk.
He was six feet off my right wingtip, fighting the same gust I was...
I looked down: 300 feet from the ground and still falling.

The trees below seemed like menacing spikes.
I looked at the hawk again.
Suddenly, he banked and flew straight downwind!
If the right air is anywhere, it's got to be upwind, I thought.
The hawk was committing suicide. Two hundred feet.

From nowhere the thought entered my mind: follow the hawk.
It went against everything I knew about flying.
But now all my knowledge was useless.
I was at the mercy of the wind. I followed the hawk.

One hundred feet. Suddenly the hawk gained altitude.
For a split second I seemed to be suspended motionless in space.
Then a warm surge of air started pushing the glider upward.
I was stunned.
Nothing I knew as a pilot could explain this phenomenon.
But it was true: I was rising.” (Guideposts)

At some time or another, we will all find ourselves caught in a
“downdraft” in our life.

Human hope is a fragile thing.

When it withers, it’s difficult to revive.

Our instinct is to want to lift ourselves up or withdraw,
rely on our own understanding.

It’s not reasonable to think that reading an ancient book,
talking to God when he seems like a stranger,
and eating a wafer and drinking a sip of wine will change anything.

But, the hearts of the travelers on the road to Emmaus
were rekindled with hope
when Jesus opened up the Scriptures to them.
And he became known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The change that took place has been described like this:

“Their lives prior to this moment were like a smoldering fire that
gives no light, just smoke to cloud things up. But once they came into
the presence of the Risen Lord their hearts were ablaze! A burning
fire gives light for all to see, and they saw, understood and believed.
All because of the Risen Lord! Jesus’ victory became their restoring
hope. It became the anchor of their lives” (author unknown).

If you are walking the road to Emmaus right now or
when you walk the road to Emmaus in the future
when disappointment, doubt, defeat, and depression seem to be
your only companions, remember that you are not walking alone.

Remember that the story didn’t end in Emmaus.

Cleopas and his friend went back to Jerusalem.

“They found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed!”

The place of defeat had become the place of victory.

Remember that the ‘stranger’ who walked with Cleopas and his friend
walks with you and me.

Remember that Jesus has left us the Scriptures and Holy Communion
to rekindle our hearts and minds with the fire of the Holy Spirit
that will burn away the fog of doubt, defeat and despair.

The Lord is risen.
He is the Savior and hope of the world.
And we will never walk alone.