

Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

You Were Strangers in the Land of Egypt

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford MA

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Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

It was Sunday morning, which is like Monday morning to us. The day after the Sabbath. The beginning of the week. And they were getting out of town.

The previous week had been hell—the tide turning, the mobs' fervor rising, and finally, explosive events flaring like carpet bombs. Torches. Arrest. Kangaroo courts. Torture. And finally came the agonizing death on Friday afternoon, finishing the ugly business just in time for Friday evening, the beginning of sacred time, the Sabbath. The grotesque anguish suddenly turned numb, swallowed up by the still silence of Shabbat. Saturday was not the worst of days. Something about the holiness of the day and their own exhausted stupor left open the possibility that maybe it would all end well after all.

But now Sunday has come, their Monday. The world bustles again, back to normal. On Saturday the horror of the week had been mitigated by the enforced pause. But on this day the events of the previous week were simply gone from sight, nonexistent, like a vortex you make with your finger in a pond—there for a moment and then gone as though it never existed. This day, this Sunday, their Monday, the world resumed its business. And the world didn't even notice that everything that had mattered so much to them had vanished without a trace. It was unbearable.

And so, they left town and headed for Emmaus. We don't even know where Emmaus was. Somewhere and nowhere, it didn't really mater. They were leaving town far more than they were going anywhere. They were trying to leave behind what the world had already forgotten.

It must have been salt in their wounds when the stranger came near them. "What are you discussing?" Their answer is filled with irony. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" But, of course, the stranger's ignorance was but more evidence that the events at the center of these disciples' lives barely made a ripple in anyone else's. In perhaps one last hopeless attempt to keep the memory alive, they answered, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people."

In the Gospels when the disciples talk among themselves as they walk along the road, they often reveal what they most desire—to sit on Jesus' left and right, to have Jesus be a mighty prophet, to earn their way to salvation, to be able to perform miracles, to be recognized as the inner circle, to have Jesus vindicate them. But this day, even as they say it, they are putting it in the past tense—we thought he was the one; we thought these things would happen. But now they are on the road out of town, no purposeful destination before them. Even as they stated it, they were letting it go; "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," but he died instead.

There is a legend about one of the Buddha's followers. He was one of the most ardent followers in those early days, and he sought enlightenment vigorously. He wanted to achieve enlightenment more than anything else. He would rarely rest or take any time from his pursuit. Nothing mattered to him more than becoming enlightened. At first everyone was sure that the man would become enlightened very quickly, for no one tried harder. But the months stretched on, and years went by, and the years stretched as decades went by, and still, the follower did not become enlightened. Finally, after many years, he came to the end of his rope. He said to himself, "I've had it. For whatever reason, I am not destined to be enlightened." With that he flopped down onto his bed and stopped trying. At that very moment, the man became enlightened.

He had been trying too hard. And his pursuit of spiritual perfection had really been about his ego. He had wanted to accomplish enlightenment. He wanted to be a spiritual hotshot. But when he let it go and let himself be a failure, it happened. He became enlightened. But the greatest part of that enlightenment was nothing like what he had been chasing. It had nothing to do with being a hotshot.

Our disciples on the road to Emmaus had a somewhat similar experience. They were in the process of letting go of all the things they hoped that Jesus would accomplish for them, and letting go of all the things that in following him they hoped they would accomplish. In a way, this conversation with the stranger they met on the road was like a therapy session. They were telling their story of failure and cleansing themselves of their ego driven desires. Like the Buddha's follower, they were giving their desires up not so much because they wanted to, but because they were utterly frustrated in pursuing them. In every meaning of the word, they surrendered.

Finally, they came to the village where they were going to stay. The stranger said his good-byes and began to continue down the road. But the day was waning, and the disciples said, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word for stranger nearly a hundred times. It's translated variously: the stranger, the sojourner, the alien. Very often God uses the word to speak to the people Israel, to remind them how they are to treat one another, even those who are strangers or foreigners. "You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Time and again God admonishes the people that at the heart of the Biblical message is fairness and hospitality even across boundaries, even extended to those they do not know or who are different from them.

It's quite the opposite of acquiring something for oneself. It is the giving of oneself. Interestingly, as the disciples unburden themselves of their ego driven desires, as they put those dreams down and give them up, they are freed to concern themselves for the stranger. "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." Such a simple sentence. Such a simple change. But it really anything but simple. It is a complete turning about. It's a move from, "Jesus, we want you to redeem us" to "Let me offer you dinner and a place to stay." They are worlds apart.

And then, in a moment of beautiful paradox, once they have given up their self-centered desires, once they have offered hospitality to the stranger, everything changes.

They are given eyes to see the risen Christ, the risen Christ in the stranger they had met on the road.

In every time and place followers of Jesus must finally come to this insight, more than insight, this change of heart. Writing from his prison cell on July 21, 1944, less than a year before his execution, and one day after the plot he had been a part of to kill Hitler had failed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge. In the letter Bonhoeffer reflected back to the year he had spent at Union Theological Seminary in New York several years before and to the friendship he made with a French pastor Jean Lesserre, who had also been studying there.

“[I] remember a conversation I had thirteen years ago in America with a young French pastor. We had simply asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with our lives. And he said, I want to become a saint (—and I think it’s possible that he did become one). This impressed me very much at the time. Nevertheless, I disagreed with him, saying something like: I want to learn to have faith. For a long time I did not understand the depth of this antithesis. I thought I myself could learn to have faith by trying to live something like a saintly life.... Later on I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself ... then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. ... And I think this is faith; this is μετάνοια. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian. How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one’s failures when one shares in God’s suffering in the life of this world?¹

On that heartbreaking first day of the week so long ago, Jesus’ followers shared the story of his defeat, and of theirs, with the stranger who had joined them. Unbeknownst to them at the time, they literally shared their suffering, and the story of Jesus’ suffering, with Jesus himself. But it was only when they reached out and offered the stranger hospitality that the picture came into focus. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Christian Gremmels et al., trans. Isabel Best et al., vol. 8, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 485-486.