

## **The Journey to Emmaus**

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Now that April is here there is talk of summer vacations in the air. Maybe it's wishful thinking on a cold day, but dreams of beaches and sunny days are circulating all over Boston.

When I was a child, by this time of year a big box often appeared on our dining room table. Between meals its contents were spread out and I remember large maps and stacks of tour books. There was also a thick aviation tome that listed all the flights going everywhere in the Western Hemisphere. My parents loved to plan trips. The red Michelin Guides had pride of place on the bookshelf right next to the family Bible. My mother picked the hotels and we children scouted for good swimming pools. My father was an engineer who was intrigued by the logistics of moving between countries and currencies with lots of luggage. If he had not been tone deaf, he would have compared it to conducting a symphony orchestra.

To this day my best childhood friend recalls my father explaining how we could drive from Tennessee to Alaska in 1957 in our Ford station wagon. He demonstrated with a trail of teaspoons stretching from one end of the table to the other and described the stops along the way. But even my mother had her limits and we never took that drive. In fact, we probably never made half the trips that were created on that dining room table. But there was something wonderful about the Big Box with all its dreams and promises. Just seeing it made me think of my parents with their heads close together, smiling and laughing together on a Sunday afternoon. The destinations recede in my memory but I remember the love in the plans. Sometimes the destination is not nearly as important as what happens to us along the way.

Our Gospel today is this kind of travel story. It takes place on Easter afternoon when a couple of Jesus' disciples are getting out of Jerusalem as fast as they can. They have lived through the horror of Jesus' death on Good Friday and fear for their own lives. Now they are confused by reports of an empty tomb and they have had it. They head for a town called Emmaus, straining towards their destination like retrievers on a leash. If they can just get away and get to Emmaus, maybe things will get better and they can figure out what to do next.

As the disciples walk along the road they meet a stranger going in the same direction. Actually the Greek word used here is "paroikos," which means "alien." It's the same root for our English word for parochial or parish. So the disciples pick up this alien and we know who it really is because Luke whispers it to the reader in the middle of the story. The disciples offer hospitality to the Risen Lord, to Jesus himself, although they don't know it. Hindsight is always revealing and later they will recall something

mysteriously compelling about the whole experience. “Were not our hearts burning within us?” they ask.

This is one of the most famous stories of hospitality in the New Testament. That’s because it’s a two-way track: the disciples reach out to a stranger and they receive more in return. They invite their alien to dinner and it’s not until he picks up bread and blesses it and hands it to them that they recognize Jesus. Then their eyes are opened and they remember that just days ago Jesus promised he would be with them every time they share bread and wine in his name. And there he is.

If you are tempted to think that these experiences of Jesus only happen to people who lived a long time ago, think again. See how he is teaching the disciples about what they already know. They have studied the scriptures but suddenly it all seems to come alive and make sense. The words are loaded with meaning that they had never caught before. Have you ever experienced that? Do you ever sit here on Sundays and tune in and out and suddenly catch a word or a phrase that makes you sit up straight? You listen to the Scriptures or sing the psalm and say, “Wait a minute, that’s really powerful. I need that word.” Was not your heart burning within you?

Or remember when you yourself connected to a stranger, an alien, legal or illegal, over a shared experience. Recall your early days in this church when you were seeking a connection to other people in your search for God. Maybe this is your first day at Trinity Church and you are feeling a little alienated. Well, don’t worry; because this is a parish. We are parochial, *paroikos*, which means we are all aliens who share community in following Christ. We are here because he promises to be with us as we break bread together. And here he is.

And that is what the disciples discover. Once they realize that they have been with Jesus, they want to be with others who share the experience. Suddenly Emmaus is no longer appealing. They never even unpack their bags. Instead, they turn around and go straight back to Jerusalem: back to the city with all of its chaos, back to risk and uncertainty. It is where they know that they can be with others who share God’s miracles. They need the community that gathers around Jesus.

Emmaus is over. In fact, its name soon disappears off the maps. If you go to Israel today you will find that there are three different places seven miles out from Jerusalem claiming to be the site of the gospel story. But Emmaus does not matter. It stopped being important when the disciples’ destination changed from a town to a Christian community. The power of the gospel story is the encounter with Christ, not the location.

What about your life? What is your destination? Is it success, wealth, a super transcript, or the perfect relationship? These can be worthy goals, but pay attention to your life right now. It is God’s arena. What is going on as you make your journey? Look for the unexpected encounter with Christ, the encounter that gives meaning to everything else in our life. Sometimes what happens along the way is more important than the destination.

Last summer my brothers and sister and I gathered in Tennessee to clear out my parents' home following their deaths. We found hundreds of photographs from family trips. They include the usual suspects: outdated, funny looking clothes, giggling children, awkward teenagers, happy parents (were they ever really that young?), and old cars that are best forgotten. The backgrounds are pretty predictable: the nation's capitol, the Tower of London, and the Smoky Mountains, to name a few. And of course some photographs were never annotated so we have no idea where we were. But the settings don't mean so much now. The people are the treasure, and there are lots of arms wrapped around each other. The places recede but those loving arms are everything. They meant everything then; they mean everything now.

Sometimes the destination is not nearly as important as what happens along the way.

*Let us pray:*

*Come, Lord Jesus and be our guest.*

*Stay with us because evening always comes and our hearts burn within us.*

*Walk with us as our Companion along the way.*

*Be known to us in the breaking of the bread. Amen.*