

April 15, 2007
Luke 24:13-31
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Companions on the Way

Sometimes the details of life can be annoying. Imagine - The car isn't working. The cat is sick. Or, it's April 15th and you still haven't finished your taxes.

Than sometimes life is more stressful. You spend all of your time carting your children around from one activity to another, and you're exhausted. You've had a nasty disagreement with another family member. Or, some part of your body has become seriously ill.

Then sometimes life is really chaotic and painful. You're struggling with a serious illness that the doctors can't figure out. Your teenage children are moving in dangerous circles. Or, someone you love dies. You find yourself in the "valley of the shadow of death."

The two on the road to Emmaus are in a "valley of the shadow of death" time in their lives. They are reeling from all that has happened in the last week. Cleopas and the other disciple traveling with him, who may have been his wife, have been on a roller coaster of events and emotions.

As have all the followers of Jesus. They had been uneasy about Jesus coming to Jerusalem in the first place. He'd had clashes with the authorities before. Some had tried to talk him out of it. "Just lay low until after Passover," they

suggested. But Jesus was having none of it.

When the crowds cheered and welcomed him as he arrived in the city, some of their fears had been assuaged. Maybe it would be OK.

But things turned ugly so fast. Before they knew what had really happened, Jesus was hanging on a cross. He was dead. It didn't seem possible. How do you get your mind around something so unreal?

Then word came that some of the women, upon going to the tomb, had found the body gone and were told by angels, "he is risen." Others then went to check. Indeed the body was gone, but they did not see him.

So what to make of all this? You might think Cleopas and his companion would stay in Jerusalem to find out what was going on. On the other hand, maybe they just couldn't take any more.

"Let's get out of here."

"I don't know what to think."

"This is getting too bizarre."

"Someone's messin' with our heads."

Where do we go when things get to be too much? Go shopping at the mall? Hide out at church? Head to the nearest bar? Head to the frig for a tub of ice cream? Crawl into bed and pull up the covers? Play the lotto? Park ourselves in front of the television or the

computer? Go to the office to tidy up a few things? Go to the gym?

What is our Road to Emmaus?

What does the church do when things get to be too much? Hide behind tradition? Or, on the other hand, try everything new? Get over-involved in the things we can manage? Only focus on the spiritual? Wander aimlessly because we can't decide? Only undertake those projects at which we know we can succeed?

The Road to Emmaus is a long and winding road. It can be a lonely road. Thankfully, Cleopas and the other disciple have each other. And you never know who you'll meet on the way.

We often romanticize how much easier it would be to be a believer if we could have been part of the post-resurrection appearances. However, when we look closely at those biblical stories, it's not always obvious who Jesus is, even to those who were there. In the gospel of John, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus until he speaks her name. In the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus appears to the disciples in Galilee, it says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." And here, on the road to Emmaus, the two do not recognize Jesus when he joins them.

Throughout this story we experience the tension between seeing/not seeing, open/closed, knowing/not knowing. First the disciple's eyes are kept from recognizing Jesus. Then as they tell him about the events in Jerusalem, they ironically comment that those who went looking for the risen Jesus did not see him, all the while that they are looking

right at him. They are closed to the fullness of who this is. Then, as they walk he opens the scripture to them. In the end, their eyes are opened, as he is made known to them in the breaking of the bread. The word used for "open" is not the usual word for opening eyes. It is the same root word that is used to describe opening the scriptures. It is a more complex word and means it is revealed to them.

How often do you suppose Christ comes to us in those standing right in front of our faces and we miss it?

This story was central to the spiritual journey of St. Benedict and was foundational to his rule that "when a guest comes, Christ comes." Therefore all guests are to be welcomed, as you would welcome Christ. I know I've told you this story before, but I think it reminds us of the deep challenge embedded in this rule. An older monk is speaker to a younger monk and says that over the years he has become able to welcome all guests equally no matter whether they are a beggar or a prime minister. But he confessed that after a long day there were times when he would see another person coming up the road, and would say, "Jesus Christ, is that you again?"

The two on the road to Emmaus engage with the risen Jesus in conversation about their religious tradition, their scriptures. Yet, they are still not fully aware of who is with them.

Then we come to the pivotal moment in the drama. The two have come to the place to which they were going. The story says, "*He walked ahead as if he were going on.*"

In my childhood church, there is a painting with which many of you may be familiar. It shows Jesus standing outside a closed door, knocking. If you look closely, you will notice there is no doorknob on Jesus' side of the door. It has to be opened by the person on the other side. God waits for an invitation.

How close those disciples came to never realizing who was present in their midst! In order to be aware, they must provide the hospitality. They must reach out to the stranger. They must invite him in. "Stay with us."

Then the guest becomes host. He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Now they have truly become companions, for the word companion literally means "with bread." Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

The language of communion is deeply embedded in this story, but notice that is simply a meal being shared by companions who have been traveling together, by companions on the way. The power of communion is rooted in its simplicity and its ordinary nature. Throughout his ministry, Jesus sat at table with his disciples, and with tax collectors and sinners, over and over again. They broke bread together every day.

And now it is in the breaking of the bread that the fullness of Christ's presence is revealed to them.

What does this say about our daily experiences of breaking bread? Whether we are sitting at home seemingly alone? Grabbing a sandwich with co-workers?

Serving lunch at the soup kitchen?
Sitting down with family or friends?
How are we attuned to the presence of Christ in our midst?

During Lent the Monday Morning Spiritual Practices Group used a book of poetry called *Becoming Bread* by Gunilla Norris to guide our reflections. One of the group's favorite poems is called "Crumbs."

Maybe, at first, to those on the road to Emmaus it seemed like just a crumb to invite a fellow traveler in for bread. Maybe it seems like a crumb to take time today to actually eat together with family or friends.

But, ah, those crumbs can reveal so much more.

Crumbs

*Be careful with the crumbs.
Do not overlook them.*

*Be careful with the crumbs:
the little chances to love,*

*the tiny gestures, the morsels
that feed, the minims.*

*Take care of the crumbs:
a look, a laugh, a smile,*

*a teardrop, an open hand. Take care of
the crumbs. They are food also.*

*Do not let them fall.
Gather them. Cherish them.*

(from *Becoming Bread*, by Gunilla Norris, p. 71)