

“On the Road Again”

Rev. Stephen Milton
Lawrence Park Community Church
April 23, 2023
Luke 24:13-35.

Today’s story is a famous one, the Road to Emmaus. Christ appears incognito to two disciples walking away from Jerusalem. When they finally realize who he is, they race back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. But before they can say what’s happened, they are told that Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter. Only then do they get to tell their story.

But here’s a puzzling thing about this story: Peter has seen the resurrected Jesus, but Luke doesn’t tell us anything about it. Peter is the most important of the disciples, the one who Jesus said would be the rock of the church. He’s a very big deal. Yet, Luke chooses not to tell his resurrection story. Instead, we are told this one, about two disciples we have never heard of before. This is the resurrection story Luke thinks is more important than Peter’s – the one we need to hear.

As the story begins, we hear that they’re walking away from Jerusalem. They’re despondent. They’d hoped that Jesus was going to be the Messiah who would rescue Israel from the Romans. They’ve been told that Jesus is resurrected, but that doesn’t keep them in Jerusalem. Instead, they head home to the village of Emmaus, which is 7 miles away.

And it’s here where a stranger meets them on the road. We know that it’s Jesus, but they don’t. The text tells us that Jesus prevents them from recognizing him. This implies that they’ve met Jesus before. What Jesus says to them is interesting. He tells them that the death and resurrection had been predicted by scripture. For the rest of the walk, which would’ve taken a good two or three hours, he goes through all the references in the Hebrew scriptures which predict the Messiah would need to be killed, and then would be resurrected.

Jesus is telling them that the present has changed the way they should see the past. They’ve been hearing and reading scripture their entire lives as good faithful Jews going to synagogue every Saturday. They’ve heard all the Messiah stories in the psalms and the prophecies. They’re being told that now that Jesus has been resurrected, this changes everything. Now we know which stories about the messiah are true, and which ones are misleading, or false. What has happened in the present has changed the past, and how we understand the past.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? When something that happens now that completely changes the way you see the past? Perhaps it was the day that you got engaged to be married, or the day you moved in with your partner. Suddenly, that first date you went on, which might not have seemed like a big deal at the time, that first date becomes the best first date you ever had because it led to this day of committing to each other. Or maybe it was that time when the doctor gave you a diagnosis and it made you think about those twinges and

aches and pains, which seemed like nothing when they first started appearing, but now are dots on the line that leads to this moment in the doctor's office.

The present has a way of changing how we see the past. That's what Jesus is saying to these men as they walk down the road to Emmaus. The Hebrew Scriptures are different now that the resurrection has come true.

And to make that point, Luke does something very clever. He reuses one of the stories he told in his gospel. It's a famous story, and we all know it. It's the good Samaritan story. In that story two men walk down the road away from Jerusalem. Along the way they see a man who's been beaten up and left for dead by some robbers. Instead of helping the man on the road, each of these two men cross the road to the other side and ignore him and keep walking. Later, a Samaritan comes along. He picks up the beaten man, binds his wounds, and takes him to an inn some distance away. He promises to pay all the bills of the wounded man until he is well.

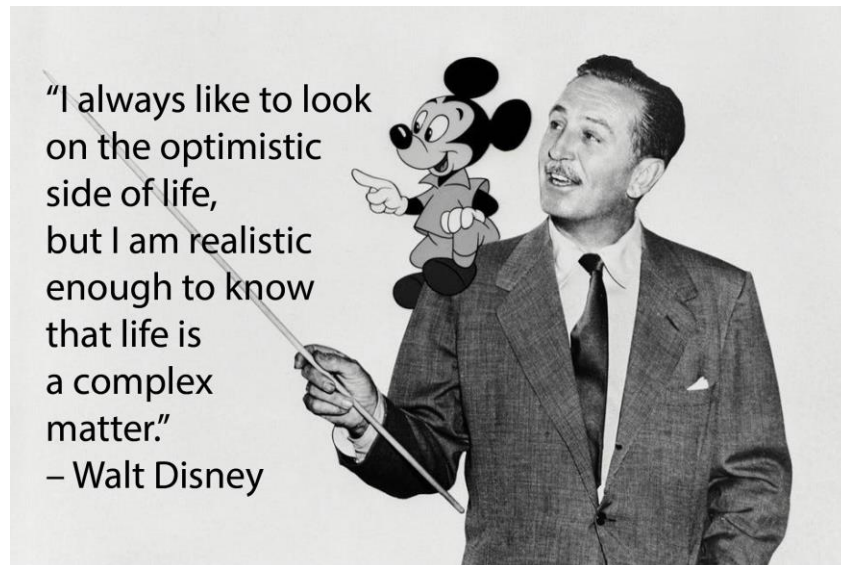
Two men, on a road, walking away from a man who has been left for dead. A story that ends with a meal and shelter in a house the beaten man does not live in. See the parallel with today's story? It also has two men walking away from a man who had been beaten – Christ on the cross. They did not stay to help, or even watch. They just left, even when they heard Jesus might have been resurrected. On their way to Emmaus, they meet the beaten man, Jesus, but they don't know it. At the end of the story, the beaten man, Jesus, is invited into their house, which serves as an inn for him. It is the same story, told twice, but with a twist.

The twist is that Jesus is with them, and they don't know it. It is as though Luke has written the sequel to the Good Samaritan story. What should the beaten man do if he ever runs into the men who left him for dead? That's what happens here. Jesus meets the men who abandoned him when he was captured and killed. But note what he does not say. Jesus doesn't berate them for abandoning him in his hour of greatest need. He doesn't ask why didn't you stay with me at the cross? Or why are you leaving Jerusalem when you've heard that I have been raised from the dead? He doesn't say, let's get some weapons and get revenge on the Romans who killed me. All those very human, bitter things he could have said, but doesn't.

Instead, he teaches them to open their eyes. To read scripture in a different way. To be a radical optimist. He tells them Jewish history has always been leading to this wonderful moment, when a dead man would come back to life. The most devastating moment of despair actually has an extraordinary silver lining, which has come true. He is teaching them not to give into despair, but to see hope where before they saw darkness.

Have you ever known a radical optimist? Someone who sees hope even when everything seems to be falling apart? Someone who's not phased by disappointment or reversals of fortune? Many of the world's greatest business leaders are radical optimists. Walt Disney's first

animation company went bankrupt a few years before he produced his first hit, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.¹ He once said,



Studies have found that optimistic people tend to invest their money better, get promoted more, and stress about finances less.² One study found that optimistic salespeople outperform their pessimistic colleagues by 56%. This led one major insurance firm to include a test for optimism when hiring new sales personnel.³

I think all of us have met radical optimists in our life and they tend to light up the room. They are the ones that everyone wants to be around. It can be a function of temperament, but it can also be something that is learned. I think churches in our time have lost Christ's radical optimism, and we need to get it back. Our goal, or our calling in life, is to share in that radical optimism. If Churches really wanted to live up to what Christ is teaching, we would have entire departments devoted to imagining positive futures for our city. What would Toronto look like if it were a truly sustainable city, one where racial and gender justice was a reality? We need to be better dreamers, radical optimists who see hope in the past and the future.

In today's scripture story, after walking for several hours, the two people reach their home in Emmaus, and Jesus looks like he is just going to keep walking. The two people invite Jesus to come in. The hour is getting late. It won't be safe on the road. Jesus accepts the invitation. Their home becomes an inn for this stranger they met on the road. After dinner, Jesus breaks and blesses the bread, and suddenly their eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus for who he is. And it is that moment that Jesus disappears.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jrose/2019/02/19/9-famous-people-that-went-bankrupt-before-they-were-rich/?sh=444a788b41cf>

² <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-financial-upside-of-being-an-optimist>

³ <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-financial-upside-of-being-an-optimist>

But He doesn't really disappear. During the last supper, before his arrest, Jesus said that those who break bread in my name will have me with them. And so, here, Jesus doesn't really disappear. He appears inside them. The two people on the road suddenly realize who Jesus was, and they start to remember their walk differently. Didn't our hearts burn as he spoke to us? The present has changed their past. They see hope now where before they had been filled with despair. Same past, different reaction, and because the present has changed the past, they suddenly see a new future. They decide to race back to Jerusalem, in the dark, on a road where bandits could catch them and beat them. They could end up left for dead on that road. But they don't care. They have seen Jesus, resurrected from the dead. His spirit of radical optimism is now inside them.

In Jerusalem, they burst into the room where the disciples are staying. They say they have seen Jesus. These two people who wandered away from Jerusalem have come back changed, on fire, their hearts burning with new hope for the future. They hear that Simon Peter has also seen Jesus, but we don't hear that story. Because we don't need to. This story on the road has been our story.

Luke's story tells us that when we have lost hope and feel that nothing can change in the world, we need to remember that hope is always right beside us, all the time, unseen. Hope is always there, on the road with us, whispering in our ear that what is terrible now can be the prelude to new life, to something wonderful. Christ opens the eyes of the despondent ones when they offer him a simple kindness: a meal and a place to stay. Nothing extraordinary. Just a bit of light in the darkness. Believe in kindness, practice it, and greater kindness and hope can be yours, not because it will be invented for you, but because your eyes, your inner eye, will open wider.

We are all on the road to Emmaus. Hope can enter into us and send us running towards the future, convinced that things can be better. This story is for all of us, as we walk this road of life, a trip where Christ's hope is always by our side.

Amen.