

Third Weekend of Easter: "Do You See? The Emmaus Disciples, a Servant Girl and Us"
Luke 24:13-35
April 18-19, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Sometimes we simply don't see what we don't expect to see! After the Easter Vigil one of our church friends greeted me at the door and said, "Pastor Mary, I was on the same flight as you back from Charlotte." I immediately remembered I'd seen someone at the gate whom I thought looked **a lot** like him, then I'd decided, "It couldn't be," and boarded the plane. I didn't "see" him because I didn't **expect** to see him or **anyone I knew** in another state so far away.

The disciples from Emmaus sure didn't expect to see their rabbi Jesus ever again. No one doubted He had been crucified, **killed** on Calvary just two days earlier. They knew His dead body had been left inside a sealed tomb. Even if they'd remembered and believed His prediction that He would rise again, I don't think these two would have guessed **they'd** be in the running as the first to whom the risen Lord would appear. We don't know much about them except that they were followers of Jesus (which is what "disciple" means), one of them was named Cleopas (the other considered so unimportant that he or she remains anonymous), and they lived or were staying in a place called Emmaus, which archeologists and Bible scholars can't even identify. These people were not among the 12 apostles; they were not in the inner circle. The women had gone to the tomb looking for Jesus' body and hadn't found it. Peter then went looking for the angels the women had encountered, or for the Lord Himself and found nothing. These two travelers on the road weren't looking for anyone or anything, except maybe comfort in their grief and understanding in their confusion, and the risen Lord finds them. It's a good reminder that sometimes God answers prayers we haven't even prayed.

There are many lovely paintings of this story by the great masters. Some show the two weary travelers on the road, unknowingly accompanied by the risen Lord. Most focus on the evening meal, though, after the disciples have asked this Stranger to dine with them. He accepts, breaks bread, and their eyes are opened! Usually the paintings try to capture the **astonished** moment of recognition before Jesus disappears. We see men half rising out of their chairs, arms spread wide in amazement (or out of a desire to touch Him?). We see the disciples' wide-eyed astonishment, and a bright but peace-filled aura of divinity and victory around the Lord. And

interestingly, many paintings include a servant, either delivering food, water, wine to the table or standing in the background, at-the-ready.

Diego Velazquez's work is the exception. In his painting, called *The Servant Girl at Emmaus* or *La Mulata*, the maid is very much in the foreground, so prominent that when I first looked at it she captured **all** my attention, and I didn't even realize that there **were** figures in the background, through a doorway or serving window. The tiny figures, easy to miss, are a halo-ed Jesus, a man to His left, and just the arm of another fellow to His right. So **why** is the serving girl in the limelight and Jesus in the shadows??

The simple answer to that question might be that Velazquez worked in a time when common folk, the little people, were being depicted in art. For a very long time it was only the shakers and movers, the wealthy who had money to commission artists to paint their own portraits or their homes or their horses, who found their way onto canvas. But Flemish and Dutch painters like Vermeer began painting handmaids and not just ladies, and others were painting stable boys, not just gentlemen, so Velazquez shone a light on the person serving the meal rather than the diners who were being served.

Maybe there's both a simple **and** a spiritual answer, though, as to why the artist has Jesus almost fading into the background. Just maybe the point is the servant woman's faith, her holy insight, into who the Stranger is whom the still-clueless disciples have invited to stay, at least according to the poet Denise Levertov who has written a poem by the same name as the painting. She says of the servant girl:

*She listens listens, holding
her breath. Surely that voice
is his – the one who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,
as no one had ever looked?
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?*

*Surely those hands were his,
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?*

Surely that face -- ?

...

*Those who had brought this stranger home to their table
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.*

*But she in the kitchen, absently touching
the winejug she's to take in,
a young Black servant intently listening,*

*swings round and sees
the light around him
and is sure.¹*

The servant girl in the painting and poem couldn't have **expected** to see the risen Lord any more than the disciples did, but she is acutely aware of everything around her, she has an open mind and heart, she picks up on the tell-tale clues and **believes**. Are **we** open enough to the Holy Spirit that our **heart** can speak to us as clearly and loudly as our mind? Faith and reason **can** go hand-in-hand, but ultimately **faith is trust in God** – trust that what God says is true, trust that God will always keep God's promises, trust that not only did the Lord Jesus rise, but that the Lord Jesus will raise us, those whom we love, and those whom we do not love as we should.

This is First Holy Communion weekend at Holy Trinity. We have taught the children to recognize, receive, rejoice in the Body & Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The question for the rest of us is: will **we also** recognize Him in the breaking of the bread?

Martin Luther said that Holy Communion is:

- food for the hungry
- healing for the sick
- life for the dying
- comfort for the bereaved.

If we truly **believed** that, mind and heart and soul, wouldn't we come more frequently? What's not to like?? Food, healing, life, comfort, forgiveness?? Our sister-in-Christ Edith Derres, now part of the Church triumphant, used to say that if people understood the Gift (capital G) that God gives in this sacrament, there'd be a line down the block of people just waiting their turn to come in. She also said that no one "takes" Holy Communion. We can only **receive** it, as from the Lord Himself. If we said that Jesus in-the-flesh were to be the Guest of Honor at a Holy Trinity Summer Soiree, Gratitude Dinner or Friendship Luncheon, we'd **all** want to be there! So would the world! But Jesus, the risen Lord, **is** present with us today. Rather than being the Guest of Honor, He is the Host of this Holy Meal; **we** are the "guests of honor." Our Lord **hosts** the meal and He **is** the meal! Today may you recognize Him in the breaking of the bread, whether you're receiving Holy

Communion for the first or the five hundredth time. Throughout the upcoming week, may you continue to recognize Him walking beside you, encouraging you, challenging you, forgiving you, strengthening you, loving you. He **will** be there. You only need eyes to see. Amen

¹Denise Levertov, "The Servant Girl at Emmaus" (quoted in saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/4/17/two-emmaus-poems-denise-levertov-and-natasha-trethewey).

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