

DEVOTIONAL

WALKING THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

By Frances Lee Menlove

LET'S LOOK TOGETHER at that curious and haunting encounter of the two disciples walking the road to Emmaus. I have been drawn to this story for personal reasons, but I'll get to them later.

This story is found in Luke 24:13–35 and goes like this: Two of Jesus' disciples are walking dejectedly home from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. Their beloved Jesus has been crucified and died.

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."

Then the stranger talked to them about the scriptures, interpreting them as he walked along. As they came near the village to which they were going, the stranger 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 into 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. (Luke 24:15–21, 29–31, New Revised Standard Version)

They hurried back to Jerusalem and found the eleven companions together, and they told what had happened to them on the road to Emmaus and how they had recognized Jesus as they broke bread together, and then how he had vanished.

THERE are so many questions about this story, it's hard to know where to begin.

How can it be that the two disciples could walk and talk with Jesus for several miles and not recognize him? How can it be that he explains the scriptures and they don't know who he is? Also puzzling is the stranger's intention to continue on without stopping. Only when they urge him to stay does he stop. And it is only after they show hospitality to the stranger are their eyes opened. And then, as their eyes are opened, in that moment, that very moment, he disappears.

Books are filled with commentaries on this odd story. But one day, I heard John Dominic Crossan, a leading New Testament scholar, give a cryptic and profound interpretation. "What do you make of the story of Cleopas on the road to Emmaus?" he was asked. "Oh," he replied, without missing a beat, "The Road to Emmaus never happened. The Road to Emmaus happens every day."¹ That was his answer. The Road to Emmaus never happened. The Road to Emmaus happens every day.

A MAP shows us that Emmaus is a town a few miles northwest of Jerusalem. And yet, that Road to Emmaus is a road we have all walked down.

Cleopas and his companion grappled with disappointment, defeat, and despair on their trek down the Road to Emmaus. We've all traveled down that same road, when the world is too much with us, when we despair at living a lukewarm existence, when we want to shut the door and forget. Forget that what we intended to do and what we did don't match. Forget that power is so often not on the side of justice. Forget that pain and death and sorrow are no respecters of age or innocence.

Last December I took a walk down the Road to Emmaus. I was diagnosed with breast cancer. On my way home from the doctor's office that day, I decided to stop by the library to see if it had any books on breast cancer. I knew next to nothing, except, of course, dread. I found several books, and as I put them on the counter to check them out, the librarian said, "I remember when I was checking out these books." Then she paused, looked something up on the computer, wrote a note on a paper, handed me the paper and said, "You need this book, too." Dutifully, I went back downstairs to the stacks, found the book, and returned to check it out.

I thanked her, and as I was turning to leave, she said, "You know, there is a sisterhood." There is a sisterhood. Yes, there is, and it has sustained me often on my walk down the Emmaus road, a road that has left me boobless and hairless and with a keen gratitude for sisterhood. I had seen that librarian several times before. She was no stranger. But that day she was *the* stranger, the stranger I met on the Road to Emmaus. The stranger who reflected the Spirit of Christ.

A couple of years ago, I was helping out at a weeklong day camp for children called "Peace Village." The kids hear stories of peace heroes, learn about non-violent conflict resolution, make crafts, go on hikes, and play games. I was helping at the registration table, which was set near the edge of the playground full of laughing, running, jumping, yelling kids. A father asked me to register his seven-year-old daughter Kelly. Kelly was clinging to his leg, sobbing. "She wants to go home," he told me, "because she is the only one here wearing a dress. I've assured her she can wear shorts or pants tomorrow. I think she will be okay for today," he added.

After the registration was complete, one of the teen helpers took Kelly off to introduce her to her teacher. I spotted my seven-year-old granddaughter Annika and whispered to her that there was a new girl in her class who didn't know anyone and was upset because



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she was wearing a dress. "She needs a friend," I said as I pointed out Kelly in her green dress.

That was Monday. On Friday, the last activity of Peace Village is a candle ceremony. The forty kids, ages six to thirteen, sit on the floor in a large circle, each holding an unlit candle. One candle is lit, then one by one each camper selects another camper who has been special to him or her for some reason during the week and lights that person's candle, saying something nice about them such as "Thank you for helping me on the hike." "I had fun playing foursquare with you." Or "You make me laugh." Kelly, with her candle lit, walked purposefully across the circle to Annika, lit her candle, and said, "You are the nicest person I have ever known." Kelly had met a special stranger on her walk down the Emmaus road. A stranger who reflected Jesus's light.

On this road that happens every day, sometimes we are the disciple, and sometimes we are the stranger.

Rabbi Kushner tells this story about a student's Great Aunt Sussie. One snowy afternoon in Nazi Germany, she was riding home from work on the bus. The SS Storm troopers

stopped the bus and began to examine papers of identification, systematically working their way down the aisle. Jews were told to leave the bus and go to a truck parked around the corner. Great Aunt Sussie was near the back of the bus, and she began to cry and tremble. The man next to her asked if she was all right. She said "I am a Jew. They are going to take me." Suddenly this man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. "You stupid [woman]," he roared. "I can't stand being near you." The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. "Damn her," the man shouted angrily, "I'm so fed up. She always does this! My wife has forgotten her papers again!" The soldiers laughed and moved on. Great Aunt Sussie and the man got off the bus together.²

Great Aunt Sussie never saw the man again. Great Aunt Sussie never learned the name of that stranger who saved her. But this story is told and retold in her family.

Another stranger met. A stranger reflecting God's light.

Sometimes we are the one walking the Road to Emmaus; sometimes we are the

stranger. The Road to Emmaus happens every day.

KNOWING that the Road to Emmaus happens every day, Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth century mystic, tells us bluntly what we are to do. This is what she says:

Christ has no body now on earth
but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but
yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
the compassion of Christ is to
look out on a hurting world.
Yours are the feet with which he is
to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which he
is to bless now.³

Sometimes the Road to Emmaus is in cyberspace. Bob Rees, in his essay "Personal Reflections on Homosexuality," recounts exchanges via email with gay Mormons. As you read these outpourings, you understand why Rees calls this a "dark time as far as our understanding of homosexuality is concerned." It is also clear Bob is walking side by side on this Road to Emmaus with his gay brothers. "I

am concerned about your depression," he writes to one. "Your worth to your Heavenly Father is inestimable, and you must not forget that. I will be your friend, whatever you decide to do, and I will be happy to talk with you as you work things out."

"I will be your friend, whatever you decide to do."⁴

Bob is right. There is a darkness today that we can't ignore. Our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers are carrying the burden of growing social and legal hostility in our country. Laws are being proposed, and sometimes passed, denying their fitness as parents and rejecting the value of their relationships. For example, there is a law under consideration in Alabama to forbid libraries and schools from buying books by gay authors or with gay characters! Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, *The Color Purple*. Wow!

Gary M. Watts is a medical doctor, a Mormon, a husband, and the father of a gay son. At the 1996 Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, Brother Watts asked these two things of his Sunstone audience:

"First" he urged, "get comfortable with the concept that homosexuals



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

"Yes, Brother Hill, we can now forego the recommend questions and go straight to your bloodwork to determine faithfulness."

are just as capable of moral relationships as are heterosexuals, and second, be willing to articulate that position publicly.” He goes on:

Too many of our good Church members stand by and watch the hurt and anguish inflicted on our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered brothers and sisters, and on us, their parents and friends, by unthinking, insensitive, uninformed individuals. Too many declare for themselves an “ethical exemption” and simply decide to not get involved.

He is asking us to say “no” to the silence. He is asking us not to let our conscience look away or fall asleep. He is asking us to walk with them on the Road to Emmaus.

They don’t want tolerance, Brother Watts continues:

They don’t want tolerance because they are victims. They see themselves, rightly, as rational, moral individuals with a right to love whomever they will. . . . [T]hey have arrived, appropriately, at a position that the morality of relationships is based on the way those relationships are conducted, not on who is involved in them.⁵

Let’s offer them radical inclusion in the full life of our Church communities, without demanding they become who they are not, without the barriers of a willingness to change or guilt-laden celibacy as the price of admission. Homosexuality is a given, not a chosen. We cannot look the other way. There is too much at stake. Remember we are talking about an intolerance which leads to broken lives, lives lived out in fear and secret, families sundered, and even suicide.

Can we see Jesus in our lesbian sisters, in our gay brothers? Can we act in such a way that they can see Jesus in us?

Look around us. Among the members of this family and household of God are lesbian sisters and gay brothers. They can be our teachers, offering us lessons of the heart. They are walking with patience and faith and with hearts made deep by pain. Let us walk along with them. Let us learn from them.

THE Road to Emmaus happens every day. Sunstone gatherings are promising places for disciples, walking the road with steps weighted by grief or despair, to encounter strangers. The Sunstone fellowship is a place of refuge, of joy in being listened to and excitement in meeting new people and new ideas.

Listen again to the exhortation of Teresa

of Avila. I will then conclude with a few words to live by:

Christ has no body now on earth
but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but
yours.

Yours are the eyes through which
the compassion of Christ is to
look out on a hurting world.

Yours are the feet with which he is
to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he
is to bless now.

And now, the words to live by:

Life is short, and we have not much
time to gladden the hearts of those
who travel the way with us. So be
swift to love and make haste to be
kind.⁶

The Road to Emmaus happens every day. The Road to Emmaus runs through Sunstone. Sometimes we are the disciple; sometimes we are the stranger. ☺

NOTES

1. This remark appears with slightly different wording in John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 197.

2. *God at 2000*, Marcus Borg and Ross Mackenzie, eds. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 68–69.

3. Quoted in James C. Howell, *Your Hands are the Hands of Christ* (Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 1998), 9–10.

4. Robert A. Rees, “In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See”: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 137–151.

5. This 1996 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium session (SL96–255) was reprinted as Gary M. Watts, “Mugged by Reality” *SUNSTONE*, December 1997, 43–51.

6. On online search reveals many different sources for this quote, few of which agree perfectly about its origins. Some claim it is a thirteenth-century benediction, others cite its presence on the doors of churches, etc. I discovered it as a favorite quote used by New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, who apparently found it in the journal of Swiss writer and philosopher Henri-Frederic Amiel, 1821–1881.

My daughter-in-law, Joanna Gardner, wrote the following poem for me as I walked my Road to Emmaus last January. I share it as further evidence of the sisterhood in action. You can visit Joanna online at www.joannagardner.com.



FOR FRANCES, ON BEGINNING CHEMO

Of all the forms of medicine
To which we are subjected,
The one that makes me swear out loud
With bad words and invective
Is chemotherapy, my friends,
That unattractive pill
Which is no fun to have to take,
No fun to pay the bill.

The medics mused, I understand,
A little bit like this:
“We’ll make a toxic potion
That would make a Chevy sick!
Those nasty cells could not withstand
The onslaught of the drug,
And if it causes side effects,
Well, who are we to judge?”

And they were right, the dirty rats,
Their treatment killed the cells,
But only after making folks
Feel anything but well.
But there’s a way to get revenge:
Don’t give them satisfaction,
No matter how much chemistry
They call up into action.

“Tra-la,” we’ll say, when first we barf!
“Ho-ho,” when first we heave!
And, “Toodle-oo,” we’ll call out to
Those first brain cells that leave.
For chemo kills the weak neurons
And leaves the strong behind,
Perhaps our long-term gift will be
Some leaner, keener minds!

So let the cocktails do their worst,
Let caustic juices drip,
Let saltine crackers line the shelves,
Let ginger ale be sipped,
Our upset stomachs will calm down
And hearts will not stay heavy,
For we are smarter, sexier,
And stronger than that Chevy!

— JOANNA GARDNER