

MEETING JESUS ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

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MEETING
JESUS
on the ROAD
to EMMAUS

*An Invitation to Friendship, Eucharist
and Christian Community*

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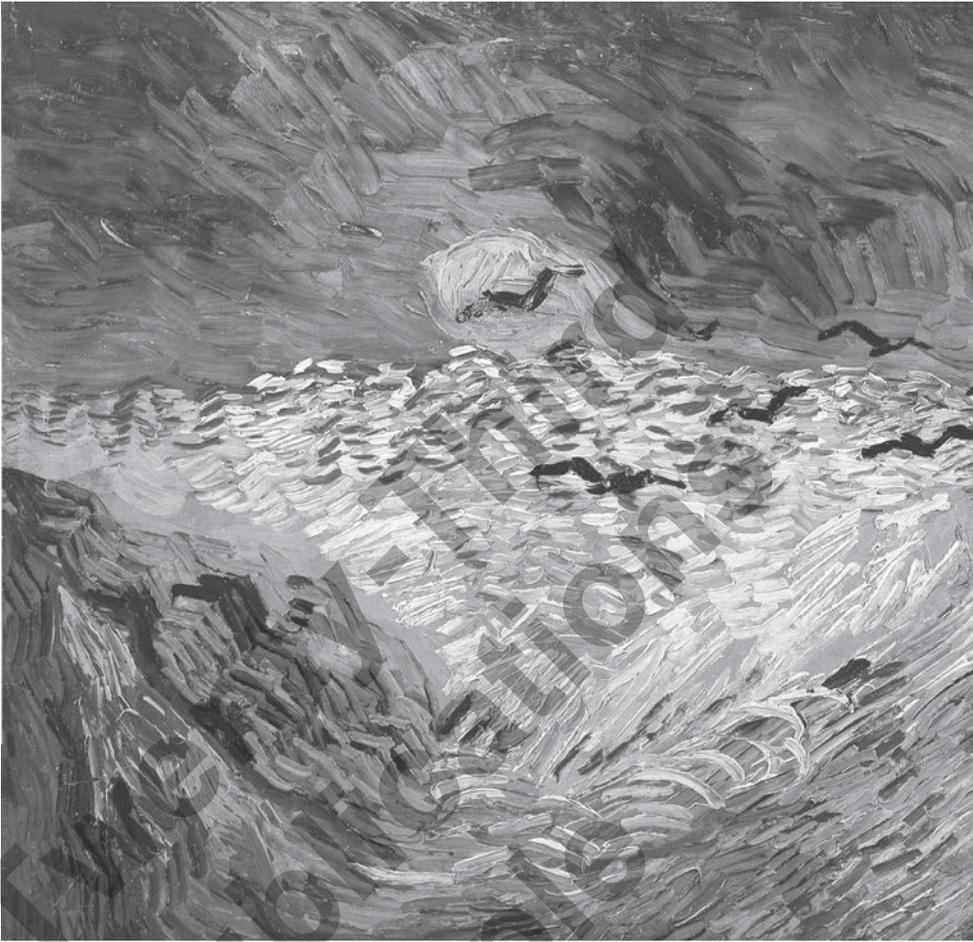
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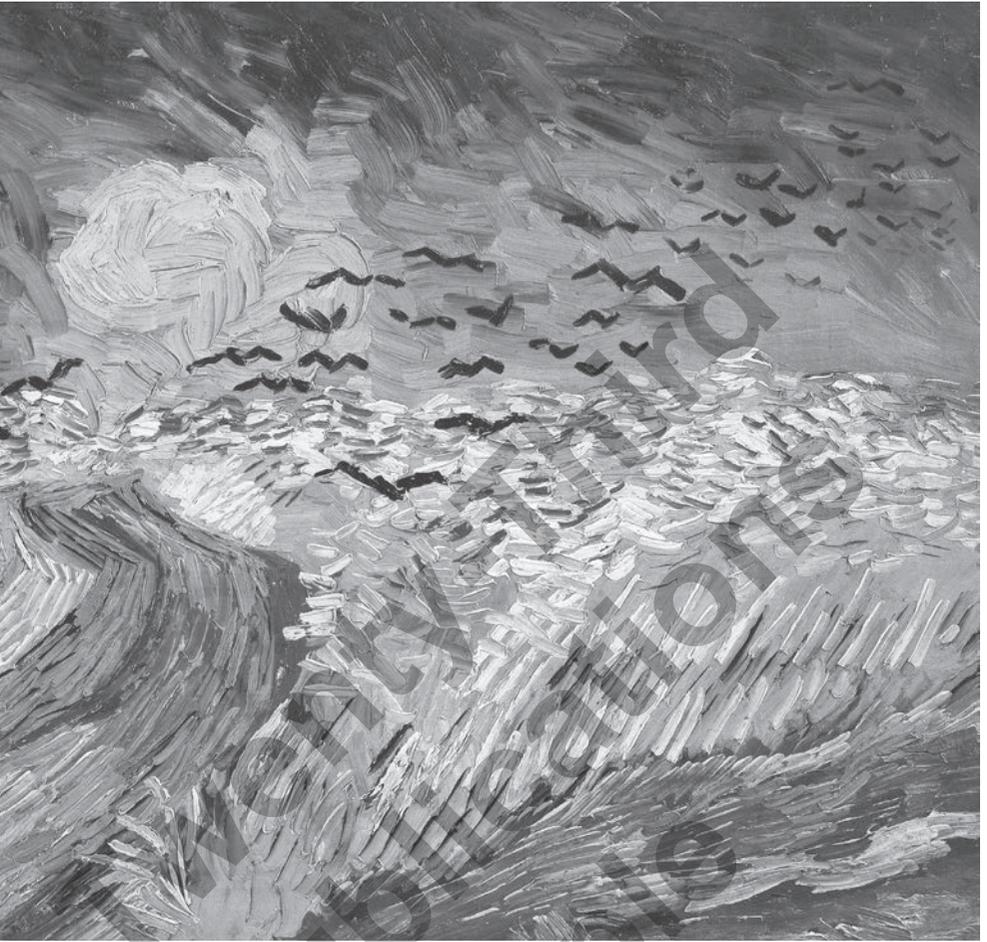


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*Then they told what had happened
on the road, and how he had been made known
to them in the breaking of the bread.*

LUKE 24:35

INTRODUCTION

The story in Luke's gospel of the two disciples' encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) contains many lessons about the journey of faith and what it means to be a follower of Christ. It is one of the most intriguing of Jesus' resurrection appearances, since Christians can identify closely with these disciples and, in many ways, claim their experience for themselves. We are all called to follow in the Lord's footsteps.

Jesus once said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).¹ This call comes from Jesus himself, who since the day of his resurrection has manifested himself to his disciples in any number of ways. In the Emmaus story, he reveals himself to them by conversing with them, explaining the Scriptures to them, befriending them, breaking bread with them, and sending them back into community. To this

day, Jesus continues to show himself to his followers. What happened to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus happens to everyone who walks by the light of faith and allows it to motivate their lives and influence their actions in daily life.

This book traces the journey of these two disciples and translates that experience for today's disciples. Each of its six chapters has something significant to say about the life of discipleship. Chapter One, "The Road to Emmaus," looks at Luke's account as it would have been understood by the Christians of his day and goes on to make relevant adaptations for today's believers. Chapter Two, "Called to Prayer," focuses on the ways we can converse with Jesus in our journey through life and emphasizes the importance of praying to God on every level of our being. Chapter Three, "Searching the Scriptures," places Jesus at the heart of biblical interpretation and says that the primary purpose of Holy Writ is to reveal the face of God. Chapter Four, "Our Befriending Lord," recognizes that Jesus not only accompanies us on the road, but also befriends us on our journey and enters into a personal relationship with each of us. Chapter Five, "In the Breaking of the Bread," emphasizes Jesus' presence in Christian table fellowship and how he reveals himself to his disciples especially in every eucharistic gathering. The final chapter, "Called to Community," locates the call to discipleship in the heart of the body of believers and recognizes that it is from there that the proclamation of the gospel extends to all the corners of the earth. A series of reflection questions under the heading "On the Road to Emmaus" appears at the end of each chapter

to assist us in appropriating the Emmaus narrative and finding its specific relevance for our lives. Each chapter concludes with a prayer to Jesus, “My Burning Heart,” that invites him to accompany us at every stage of the faith journey and asks him for help in responding to his call to discipleship.

Luke’s account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus has great relevance for us today. It teaches us that the gospel receives its power in an encounter with the Risen Lord, who reveals himself to us in many ways and uses us to reach out to others. The spread of the gospel flows from this authentic encounter and cannot be sustained without it. This encounter often takes place while we are on the road and at times when we do not clearly recognize Jesus’ presence in our midst. For this reason, the story of Emmaus is also our story. It teaches us that Jesus’ disciples follow him because they love him with a love that opens their eyes and enables them to see him in their midst through the eyes of faith and to continue their journey with renewed hope and confidence of his abiding presence. May this book help you in your journey of faith. May it deepen your love for the Lord and renew your hope in the coming of his kingdom. May it help you recognize him in your midst and, most especially, in the breaking of the bread.

CHAPTER ONE

The ROAD *to* EMMMAUS

The story in Luke's gospel of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus expresses the soul of the Christian message and resonates deeply in the hearts of the faithful. It does so, because it serves as a bridge between the Risen Lord's appearances to his disciples and that of the believing community's experience of him in the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. Its significance stems from its position in Luke's gospel and its pow-

erful claim that the Risen Lord accompanies his followers in their journey of faith. Down through the ages, Christians have found themselves reflected in this story of the encounter of these two disciples with their Lord. They see themselves on a similar journey. Like the two disciples, they know that the call to follow Christ, once freely embraced, will change their lives forever.

Some Background

Jesus' appearance to two disciples as they were walking on the road actually occurs twice in the gospels: once in Mark 16:12–13 and again in Luke 24:13–35. Mark's rendering is by far the shortest: "After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them." Luke offers many more details and makes the encounter a central feature in his gospel.

The two accounts differ not only in length, but also in some key points. A few verses earlier, Mark's account says that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, but that no one believed her (Mark 16:9–11), just as no one believed the two disciples when they recounted their experience. Luke's account, by way of contrast, suggests that the two disciples were greeted with joy and excitement upon returning to Jerusalem and that they themselves received the news that Jesus had appeared to Simon (Luke 24:34). Such discrepancies probably stem from subtle variances in the eyewitness accounts themselves and from the particular themes that

Luke wished to emphasize in his gospel. His telling of Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus touches many points of the gospel message and teems with significance for the faith.

Luke's gospel roughly dates from about 85 AD, some fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection.² By this time the nascent church had expanded throughout much of the Roman world and made great progress in evangelizing the Gentile nations. Luke addresses a largely Gentile Christian audience and shapes his message toward issues that directly impact their lives, not the least of which were questions about the nearness of the end times and the Lord's Second Coming. By now, already a couple of generations removed from Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, Luke's readers are wondering about the Lord's immanent return, a conviction so much in the foreground of the early Christian message.

The burning questions in the hearts of his audience concern the authenticity of their own faith experience and its continuity with the Risen Lord's appearances to his early disciples. What are they to do if the Risen Lord has ascended to the right hand of the Father yet his return is no longer considered immanent? Has the Lord left them to fend for themselves in their historical journey? How are they to experience him in their present reality? Luke's response to these concerns is that the faithful must now rely on the ongoing presence of the Lord's Spirit in the believing community, especially as he reveals himself through the Scriptures and in the breaking of the bread. The account of the two disciples on the road to

Emmaus addresses these concerns and speaks on a number of levels to the experience of these second- and third-generation Gentile Christians.

The Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13–35)

Unlike the other gospels, Luke presents the Emmaus encounter as Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance. As the story unfolds, two disciples are making their way from Jerusalem to the nearby village of Emmaus, some three days after Jesus' death and burial. As they walk along, discussing the events of recent days, Jesus draws near to them and asks them what they are discussing. Looking downcast and prevented from recognizing him, they stop in their tracks and ask him if he is the only one in Jerusalem who has not heard of the things that have happened to Jesus of Nazareth, about his suffering and death, the empty tomb, and the claim by some of the women that angels had announced to them that he was alive. After reprimanding these disciples for their foolishness and slowness of heart, Jesus opens the Scriptures up to them, explaining everything in Moses and the prophets about the suffering the Messiah must undergo in order to enter into his glory. Later in their journey, as they reach the village and with evening drawing near, the two disciples convince Jesus to stay with them. Later on, while they are at table, he takes bread, says the blessing, and breaks it. At that moment, their eyes are opened, they recognize him as their Master, and he just as quickly vanishes from their midst. Overwhelmed with joy, the two set out immediately for Jerusalem to tell the other

disciples about what they have experienced. They, in turn, are greeted with the news that Jesus has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon.

Luke places this gospel story in a strategic location in his gospel. Prior to it, he tells of the discovery of the empty tomb by some of the women, a simple announcement by two men in dazzling clothes that Jesus is risen, and the unbelief with which the discovery of the women was met (Luke 24:1–12). Afterward, when the two disciples return to Jerusalem to share what had happened to them, the disciples in Jerusalem confirm their experience by announcing that Jesus has risen and has appeared to Simon. Then, at that very moment, Jesus himself appears in their midst, greets them, shows them his wounds, asks them for something to eat, opens up the Scriptures to them, tells them to be witnesses of his resurrection, promises to send his Spirit, blesses them, and is then carried up to heaven (Luke 24:36–52). The implication is clear. The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is a central feature of the Easter proclamation. Luke integrates the experience of the two disciples in an intimate way with the Easter event. He accentuates its importance by recounting it first and, in doing so, placing it on the same level as the discovery of the empty tomb and Jesus' appearance to Simon.

Luke's audience could identify closely with the two disciples who encounter Jesus on the road. Other than their mention in this story, these disciples are unknown to the rest of the New Testament. Although one is identified as Cleopas, nothing else is known of him and, for all practical purposes, he

remains as faceless as his traveling companion. This anonymity is one of the strengths of the story, since down through the ages most of the Christian faithful have themselves left few historical markers behind with the result that their identities also remain clouded in the fog of history. This lack of detail raises a number of questions and invites Christians to engage the story with their imaginations. Why do these two disciples seem in such a rush to leave Jerusalem so soon after the death of their Master? Why are they traveling together? Is the unnamed disciple male or female? What is the precise nature of their relationship? Why are they traveling to Emmaus? Where exactly is this village? Its very existence would have been lost to history were it not for its mention in this gospel story. Luke's readers could easily place themselves in the sandals of the two disciples making their way to this unknown country village. When reading the story, moreover, they could easily be led to ask themselves how Jesus might appear to them as they make their way in their walk of faith and if they too would be able to recognize him as he joins them on the road of life, in the Scriptures, and in the breaking of the bread.

The Journey of Faith

In this way, Luke's account of the two disciples who encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus has embedded itself in the Christian imagination. Christians who read this story and ponder it understand that it is very much about their own journey of faith. In one way or another, each of us is on the road to Emmaus. The story unfolds in a way that resonates

in the heart of every disciple. It is a story of disillusionment, encounter, discovery, and joy. This story of faith has left an impression on our minds that cannot and will not soon be forgotten.

Luke casts his story in the context of a journey, a theme that permeates much of his gospel narrative and that has clear implications for the life of discipleship. As Jesus' journey to Jerusalem covers the central chapters of Luke's gospel narrative (Luke 9:51–19:27), so the journey of the two disciples away from and then back to Jerusalem marks a central feature of the Good News as it unfolds in the life of every believer. Jesus goes to Jerusalem to suffer death and rise to fulfill his Father's will. The two disciples return to Jerusalem because they have experienced the Risen Lord and wish to share that news with the community of disciples they left behind. The faith of every believer has its roots in this Easter experience. The Christ event—Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection—takes place in Jerusalem, and it is from there that the gospel message will take shape and first be proclaimed.

In addition to the theme of journey, the story also stands out because so little is known about the village of Emmaus itself, making it, in effect, a destination that could be virtually anywhere in the minds of the faithful. Although several locations have been suggested, scholars have struggled to identify the village's exact whereabouts.³ Since the two disciples were making their way there by foot, it was most likely within a day's walk from Jerusalem and accessible by road. These scant details, while limiting for the historian, leave us free to

imagine ourselves on a similar journey. Moreover, that *two* disciples were traveling together to this small village brings to mind the mission of the seventy disciples, whom Jesus sent out in pairs to the neighboring towns and villages that he himself was planning to visit (Luke 10:1–16). Could it be that these two disciples numbered among the seventy and that Emmaus was one of the villages visited by them when they were on their mission? Could it also be that they were returning to Emmaus to share the news of the recent events with the people there? What was their business there? Did they come from there? Did they have friends and family there? Were they going there to warn others? Were they fleeing? Were they going there to hide? Although the precise reason for the disciples traveling to Emmaus so soon after Jesus' death and burial will never be known with certainty, it is not improbable that fear, despondency, and perhaps even disillusionment played at least a small role in their motivation for leaving Jerusalem at such a crucial time. Just as significant was their great joy in experiencing Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and the eucharistic overtones this would have for the readers of Luke's gospel.

Encountering Christ

The Emmaus story is about the personal encounter that two downcast, possibly disillusioned, disciples have with the Risen Lord. In the course of this encounter, Jesus conceals his identity as he accompanies them. After he converses with them, opens up the Scriptures to them, breaks bread with them, and

finally reveals himself to them, he suddenly vanishes from their sight. As the story unfolds, their somber and downcast mood gives way to a sense of urgency and sends them running back to Jerusalem to share the Good News of the Lord's resurrection. After their experience of Jesus on the road, everything changes. Nothing remains the same. They now have a message to share, Good News to tell. Their entire focus is now on proclaiming the gospel message. All else is secondary.

This story captures the joy of experiencing the Risen Lord. In it, Luke reminds his readers that the same Christ whom the two disciples encounter on the road to Emmaus accompanies all believers in their journey of faith. He affirms that Christ reveals himself in a special way whenever they converse with him in prayer, ponder the Scriptures, befriend a stranger on the way, break bread together, and live in community. Although they may not always recognize him as they carry out these basic tasks of Christian discipleship, he is there nonetheless and promises to give them a genuine, if not fleeting, sense of his ongoing and steadfast presence.

From beginning to end, this story is about the walk of discipleship. It challenges us to delve more deeply into the various practices that support us in our journey of faith and asks us to discern if they mediate a personal encounter with the Risen Lord or have become nothing but empty structures that fail to impart life. It invites us to examine our lives and ask ourselves if we believe that Jesus accompanies us in our journey of faith and if we believe he is really listening to us when we pray. It asks us to look at our expectations about experienc-

ing him in the Scriptures, in our celebration of Eucharist, and in our life together. It reminds us that such practices—prayer, friendship, discernment, meditating on Scripture, Eucharist, and community—are central to the intimate encounter with Christ in a person’s life and to the life of discipleship. It affirms what every Christian seeks and yearns for. It reminds us that the Christ of faith is one with the Jesus of history and can be experienced by anyone who is led by the light of faith and who opens their heart to the fire of his love.

Life in Christ

The Emmaus story also focuses on gospel living. The experience of the two disciples changed their entire outlook on life and instilled in them a desire to follow Christ and share in his life and work. Their motivation for doing so stemmed from their firsthand experience of the Risen Lord. When they recognized him in the breaking of the bread they understood how he had accompanied them on the road, conversed with them, and unfolded the meaning of the Scriptures to them. They understood that Christ was present to them not only when they were at table, but also during the in-between places of life: when meeting a stranger on the road, in their conversation on the way, when showing hospitality at the end of journey. The early Christian community would take this message to heart by seeing that the gospel message was meant to permeate all of life.

The implications of this insight are clear. When Jesus opened up the Scriptures to the two disciples and explained

to them that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer so that he could enter into his glory, he was inviting them to probe the Scriptures still further and to see their own lives reflected in his paschal mystery. In interpreting this passage, the early Christian community would come to see that in this passage Jesus was referring not only to the suffering that he himself had recently undergone, but also to the suffering that lay ahead for his followers. Luke's readers would see that the Risen Lord encountered by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was the same as the one they celebrated whenever they gathered for Eucharist. To break bread together was a celebration of their intimate communion with his Body and Blood and, hence, his suffering, death, and resurrection.

During his life on earth, Jesus had said repeatedly that anyone wishing to be his disciple must take up his cross and follow him. Only by following him in this way could they share in his glory. The two disciples return to Jerusalem when they recognize him in the breaking of the bread, because they know that his resurrection confirmed everything that he ever said and did. In one way or another, we are all called to return to Jerusalem in order to announce the good news and continue the work of Christ's redeeming love. To encounter the Risen Lord—be it at the empty tomb in Jerusalem, on the road to Emmaus, or wherever Christians gather to break bread together—means living in communion with him and sharing that communion with others in mission.