

Desiring Presence
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Zak Carroll
April 11, 2021

Luke 24:13-35

Welcome, this morning. My name is Zak Carroll, I am a seminary student at Yale Divinity School and excited to be joining you as a guest preacher through the Raymond Preaching Fellowship at the Congregational Church of New Canaan.

I was heartened to hear from your pastor that today's Scripture was on the Road to Emmaus from Luke 24. The Road to Emmaus is one of those stories that, at least in my experience within the church, is a favorite amongst congregants. It is the fantastic account of a post-Resurrection interaction between the risen Jesus and two otherwise ordinary followers of Jesus.

Though beloved, the story contains many peculiarities. For starters, the story is told in only one Gospel. It is not an account either familiar to the other authors or important to them. Next, though these two followers of Jesus are on a "road to Emmaus," scholars do not know what city Emmaus was. There are several possible options, but none of them quite match the description from Luke's account. Because the city is shrouded in mystery, the path upon which Jesus and these two individuals traveled is unknown. Lastly, the individuals mentioned in this story remain disguised to us. One individual is given no name or identifying marker; the other, Cleopas, is mentioned in the whole of Scripture once, that place being this passage. Even the individuals involved in this story are obscure to our gaze.

And yet, there is something about this passage that continues to draw people in and speak to their faith journeys. In my seminary at Yale Divinity School, Andover Newton Seminary, our weekly worship gathering is called simply "Emmaus." The most important aspect of our community life, coming together weekly (in the pre-COVID era) for a shared meal, a glass of wine, and a Bible study, followed by worship and prayer and communion in the YDS chapel, was expressed best by referencing this narrative. Some of you might be familiar with the Road to Emmaus retreat program. It is a spiritual

experience developed by Catholics in the United States nearly 40 years ago and it has served over 1.4 million people since. Likewise, those involved in putting together that program felt so compelled by this unique Scripture which we encounter today that they named and modeled their retreat after it.

So what is unique in this story? I think the first part of the answer to that is that the Road to Emmaus demonstrates the potentially world-shattering nature of an encounter with the Jesus of our faith. These travelers are not faith superheroes or people who already had life figured out before they encountered Jesus - they are people seriously wrestling with doubts about the future, fears about their present, and sorrows from their past. Such experiences are not unique to the traveling followers; they are shared by us today. The testimony of these travelers is that an encounter with Jesus can be so world-shattering that it reorients one's life and changes one's direction. It is a faith encounter that compels one to change directions, upend plans, rush to loved ones, and proclaim a message of hope to a hurting world.

Such a promise is enticing enough. It is no wonder why this story, despite all of its characteristics to the contrary, should speak to and inspire people of faith to this very day. What we might be better served to ask ourselves now is how we can experience a similar faith encounter in Monroe, Connecticut on April 11, 2021. To that question I do not think there are simple and definite answers. There are, however, indications from this story of what helped produce the transformative experience.

As a seminarian, I am tempted to say that knowledge or proper teaching is what led these travelers to such a faith experience. Yet, the text rebuts such an argument; Jesus traveled and taught these followers for miles, most likely lasting hours. Though his words tugged on their hearts, they did not produce a life-reorienting faith experience. One might suspect that it was being with Jesus, in the presence of the risen Christ, that changed these followers' hearts and minds. Yet, much like with teaching, they were able to spend miles of the journey and hours of their time with Christ without any world-shattering moment. The uniquely compelling moment was not in these aspects.

It is at the meal, the breaking of the bread, that their eyes open and they realize what has occurred. It is at that moment that the transformation is most visible, and it is a wonderful moment to meditate upon. The similarity between this moment of meal and our own holy meal of Communion is real; so too, might I add, do we see Jesus clearly when we are able to celebrate that meal. As I read the story, though, I noticed that this moment of meal and discovery would not have occurred if not for the desire of the followers. Jesus, after spending many hours with these fellows, appears ready to continue walking and leave them. It is the longing of the followers, the desire to remain bound to the unknown-Jesus and their incipient community forged by the miles of the road that results in a transformative faith moment.

The desire to be in the presence of Jesus, even the unknown-Jesus, is not the most glamorous moment in the passage. And yet, I think it might just be the most important moment. Without that desire, without that inexplicable longing to remain connected to a fellow traveler, the faith encounter would have ended. It was the urging of these two individuals that Jesus stay which created the space for their own transformation. It was their commitment to remaining in the presence of another that led to them recognizing the presence of God in their midst.

We are in a season of growth and renewal. We are shaking off the coldness of winter and looking to the liveliness of summer. We are steadily leaving behind the presence of COVID and running headlong into a miraculous world wrought by our healthcare workers and scientists. For many of us, or at least I know for myself, it will be difficult to transition back into the same sort of communal living that we once had. As we continue to maintain safe practices and remain cautious, we also are beginning to have the opportunity to resume the sort of community that we have for so long had to go without.

My hope is that, as we enter this phase of life, the story of the Road to Emmaus shows us the need we have for binding ourselves together with one another. My hope is that we see how the desire for presence with one another is the precursor to the transformation that God seeks to work in our lives. The travelers walking the road to Emmaus did not know the surprise that lay ahead of them, but they knew that they needed to remain close to

this fellow wanderer. Their faithfulness to that longing brought them to the place of seeing God in front of them. We do not know the many twists and turns that lie in front of us and our lives. We do know, though, that committing to live in community with one another, desiring to walk through life together, and being in the presence of one another is the first step in uncovering how God is working in our midst. My conviction is that if we share the same desire as these travelers on the road to Emmaus, then we will wake up some day, maybe a month from now or maybe a year from now, but we will look back and our eyes will be uncovered as we realize all the ways in which our desire for community and the presence of one another became the seeds for God's life-transforming work. Today, that is why I am heartened to once again read the story of the Road to Emmaus. Amen.