

Does What Happens in Emmaus Stay in Emmaus?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 24:13-35

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These days they call it talk around the watercooler. In the offices of our society people take five and ten minute breaks in the course of their workday, and they climb out of their cubicles for a drink of water. And there at the watercooler they run into other people they work with and they talk about whatever it is that everyone is talking about. But what is everyone talking about? Well, of course that depends on what's going on. It could be a big event in the news like a terrorist attack or an election. It could be the news that someone in the office has died, or has announced that they are quitting. It could be juicy gossip about who in the office is dating whom, or who has been caught in some scandal. "I just can't believe it" people say. "I never thought that would happen. Where were you, when you first heard about it?" That's talk around the watercooler.

Well, as we begin today's story from the gospel of Luke with two people going down the road from Jerusalem to the little town of Emmaus, we see two people having this watercooler talk. They are talking about what everybody is talking about, the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, the crucifixion and death of the one these two had pinned all their hopes on, the one they thought was the Messiah, the one who would save Israel. Now, of the two people who are talking, one of them is named Cleopas, and some commentators suspect that the other person is Ms. Cleopas and this is a married couple going down the road together. Who knows if that's really the case, but they seem to share a home together, so let's call them a couple why don't we?

Well, as the drama of this story unfolds suddenly there is a third person who has joined this couple. This person is a stranger to the couple who are talking and he says to them “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”

Cleopas answers him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” Now, a lot is lost in translation, but what Cleopas is really saying to the stranger is “Have you been living under a rock?” He says “Have you been living under a rock?” because, you have to understand this is like someone coming up to you on September 12th, 2001 and telling you they had not heard about 9-11, or someone coming up to you on November 23rd, 1963 and telling you they had not heard that Kennedy was assassinated. The news about Jesus’ crucifixion and death is simply news that everybody knows, and everybody is heard about, unless that is you are living under a rock. Well, as the couple starts explaining all the news to the stranger about Jesus, it turns out that this stranger is a theologian. And as if to foreshadow what’s coming next, the stranger starts to tell them why all these things had to happen to Jesus and how they are all a fulfillment of the scriptures.

Well, the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus is a seven mile journey, and as you may know, it takes quite a long time to walk seven miles, so by the time they reach the village, the day is ending. The theologian stranger appears to be going further down the road, but the couple says to him “Why don’t you come inside and stay with us?” and they welcome him into their home. Then, in the very next scene the three sit down together to sup and as they break bread suddenly this couple’s eyes are opened and they recognized the stranger. This mysterious stranger is not just a theologian. He is not just some uninformed person who had not heard the watercooler talk that everyone had heard. This mysterious stranger is none other

than the risen Christ himself. And then, not a moment after they recognize him, he is gone. He is gone just as quickly as he came.

When they broke bread together, when they ate together their eyes were opened. That sounds so familiar doesn't it? Where have we heard that before? Do you know a story about a man and a woman whom God told they could eat any fruit except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? But because a serpent tricked them they ate the fruit from that tree anyway. Then, their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked so they hid. They ate and their eyes were opened. That was the first meal in the old creation, the first meal whereby sin and death entered the world—and here we have the first meal in the new creation, the first meal in the new creation where sin and death have been overcome in the resurrection of our Lord.

Some commentator one time said that the reason this couple didn't recognize the risen Christ going down the road is because it was getting late and the sun was setting and the shadows were lengthening. But then they recognized him in the breaking of the bread because in order to break the bread the Lord had to show his hands, and the couple could see the holes in his hands. That's a clever reading of this story, but you know, I think it ultimately misses the point. The reason this couple's eyes were opened is because the resurrection is an undoing of what was done in the old creation. The apostle Paul calls Christ the new Adam, and the new Adam redeems creation from what the old Adam did in the Garden of Eden.

Well, this first meal in the new creation would be a big deal for a little town, wouldn't it? Well, Emmaus was a little town. Just like the birth of Christ was a big deal for the little town of Bethlehem, the first meal of the new creation is a big deal for the little town of Emmaus. But

today, I have a question. Surely you have seen all the commercials about vacationing in Las Vegas which say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, with the implication being that in Vegas you can let your wild side and let's be honest your sinful side run free and no one will ever know about it. But today what I want to ask is this. Is Emmaus anything like Vegas? That is, does what happen in Emmaus stay in Emmaus? Is this the only time anyone's eyes would be opened when they broke bread together? Is this the only time someone's eyes were opened and they recognized the risen Christ in the face of a stranger? Or does that happen every time we extend this kind of hospitality to a stranger, every time we welcome a stranger into our most private and intimate of spaces?

I know of a church that had a program of community meals, very much like the meals that we volunteer to serve down at Reedurban once a month. But this church served them once a week, and while they were serving the homeless and the undernourished year round, during the season of Lent they also had what's called vespers or evening services going on. And these services were happening on the same day of the week as the community meals, maybe it was Tuesday, maybe it was Wednesday, it doesn't matter. Well, this church decided to arrange things so that the services would happen at the end of the meals so that the volunteers who were working in the kitchen and serving the hot meals could be able to come to the vespers services. And out in front on the church sign, or the marquis as we like to call it, there was a reminder about the evening Lenten services for the community and the sign said, "Everyone Welcome". Well, you know what's coming next, don't you? For a couple of weeks, these services went on without incident, but then, when the volunteers from the community meal and other regular members of the church started showing up for the Lenten services, one

evening one of the homeless people who had just got finished eating his meal in the fellowship hall came in to sit in the sanctuary. There he joined all the nicely dressed people in their navy blazers and ties and their freshly dry-cleaned skirts and dresses with his ragged and unwashed clothes, smelling of cigarettes and cheap booze. Now, I am sure this man got some looks, but most people said, "So one homeless person wandered in the sanctuary, so what? Are we so unchristian that we cannot welcome one homeless person into our sanctuary, what are we about anyway?" But then the next week, a couple of more of these same homeless looking characters wandered in, and then the next week, it was a few more. Well, Lent of course is only forty days, and so by that time the season of Lent was basically over. But then the next year rolled around and the next year the church was still doing the weekly community meals and they were still having their Lenten vespers services, and yes they were still holding them at the close of the meals so all the volunteers could attend. But this year there was one change—a change you almost wouldn't notice unless you looked closely. This year the sign out in front of the church again mentioned the evening services, but this year the sign no longer said "Everyone Welcome". Don't you wonder why that is? Do you need to wonder why that is?

You know, I think there are plenty of people in this world who would care for the needs of the homeless, they would help people with different races and nationalities and who have different morals and they would do all kinds of things for people who are different from them, but they wouldn't dare welcome such a person into their sanctuary or their home. There are plenty of people in this world whom I think we would love to help and whom I think we would love to do kind things for but for whom it is frightening to let into our own intimate space, to let them sit down at our dining room table and eat the food that we would eat. But doesn't this

story tell us that when we show hospitality to a stranger, within the face of that stranger we get to see them differently? Doesn't it tell us that in the face of that stranger we get to see the risen Christ, just as this couple in Emmaus saw the face of Christ in the face of a stranger that they welcomed into their home?

Well, I know that at this point in my sermon, there must be questions, and maybe some of you will be inclined to ask me, "What do you mean that in the face of a stranger we will see the face of Christ? What do you mean, pastor Rich? Will we really see the same Christ who is up in heaven, or will we just see a reflection of Christ? Will we really see the real Christ who was actually raised from the dead on the third day or will we just see someone who reminds us of Christ?" You know what, these are good questions to ask at some point in our lives, but here's what I think, I think that the more we find ourselves opening our homes and sanctuaries, opening our most intimate private spaces to the company of strangers, to the company of those who are different, the more we realize that these are really silly questions. They are silly questions that don't merit an answer.

Is Emmaus anything like Vegas? Does what happens in Emmaus stay in Emmaus? That is up to us, isn't it? What will we decide?