

Church of the Pilgrimage  
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### Luke 24:13-35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

### **Finding God**

On an early morning walk, our first day in North Scottsdale, in the tony neighborhood where my brother and his new wife live, I found myself surprised, stunned in fact at the way springtime in the desert bursts with new life. Birds were singing, cacti issued blossoms of scarlet and gold, agave plants pale yellow plume-like flowers, bright pink bougainvillea spilled over walls, the occasional bunny crossed my path, while a kind of morning dove cooed its haunting call.

Already I was feeling a little better, better for being out in nature for having space to stretch legs that had been cramped for the long plane ride west and a spirit too that had been cramped. See, going into this wedding, this great family affair I had my share of feelings. First, there was the timing – right after Holy Week, just a tad exhausting. Way back in the fall, working to find a date my brother had asked first about Palm Sunday weekend, then Easter weekend, he was just looking for a date

before it got too darn hot out there, but I found myself a bit surprised he was so clueless about the fact his sister had a few expectations on her already at that time of year. And in the months leading up to the wedding I was cross about other things...things that would be tacky to get into. Suffice it to say I was feeling a kind of gulf between my brother's life and my own what makes him tick, and what makes me tick. Suffice it to say that for me, "the nerves were on the outside" and I was trying my best to put them back on the inside so everything would be okay.

Oh, there was one more thing working on me. It's this role or boundary thing that comes with saying yes to officiating at a relatives wedding. Am I a pastor here, or a sister? What if I try to be playful in my remarks, and I cross some line of appropriateness? And what if I find myself having to bellow the words, because this wedding is to take place not in a church but around a pool in my brothers back yard and by the time it starts I might be trying to lead a wedding in an environment that feels pretty much like a cocktail party.

You get the picture. Going into this wedding I wasn't my most relaxed, at ease self.

So there was the calming, restoring first morning there walk. There was the fact that we arrived a whole day before anyone else, which gave Mike and I time for a nice relaxed dinner with my brother and his fiancée, just the four of us – good "connecting time", as we say today. And when the visitors began to arrive, I was amazed – though I should not have been, because my brother is someone who stays in touch with everyone, a person who never loses touch with a friend. There were high school friends, college friends, work friends, neighborhood friends and old friends of our family. There was a cute young family that had traveled quite a ways... Carl had been the young father's Big Brother for many years when the dad was a young boy growing up in Atlanta and my brother was just starting his career in business. So many people had come quite a distance, and nearly everyone I met spoke of how great Carl was, or how helpful he'd been to them, and how happy they were for his finding someone, after all these years.

I had to notice that my brother, so often uptight, restless, needing to be "in charge" was decidedly relaxed and thoroughly enjoying himself. And as for me....well, only a complete and total Grinch of a sister couldn't be caught up in this celebration.

The day, the evening of the wedding came and my fear about having to bellow over a crowd could not have been more off the mark. On the large backyard veranda by the pool chairs were pulled in close, looking out towards an Arizona sunset while the bride and groom stood in the middle. There was an appropriate hush when the ceremony began and as I looked, several of his buddies, who'd known him all these years could be seen wiping away a tear. When it was time to pray, people bowed their heads. Everyone said the Lord's Prayer in their own tradition, as I asked them to, and my brother laughed his big laugh at the resulting cacophony. But even that seemed fun, and in keeping with the day. It could not have been more intimate, or lovely.

Later, when ceremony turned to party, I was totally free to just be Carl's sister, a part of the celebration like anyone else. There was lots of catching up, most of it pretty light, but one cousin did want to talk about this time of life we find ourselves in, this poignant time of life when we are saying goodbye to our aging parents, who gave us life and who are, in so many ways, our heroes.

Huh. When we got on the plane to head west the day after Easter I hadn't expected all this deep meaning everywhere! From healing family interactions to Sedona's awesome red rocks there was in this time away for me a sense of walking on holy ground -- life as a gift, healing in the offering, grace everywhere.

Perhaps my own surprise reflects Emmaus Road. The disciples, after all, didn't head out of town expecting much. Emmaus wasn't anyplace special, they were really just "getting out of dodge." And though the cross was at their back, Golgotha miles behind them they still had the imprint of what had gone wrong clouding their eyes so they could not make sense of the women's story of the empty tomb, let alone the fact that it was now Jesus with them, walking along beside them.

Emmaus Road is about many things. How hard it is to first grasp resurrection life, that is, if you stay in your head. How we see things in the familiar – in bread broken and wine poured. Maybe too Emmaus road is about persistent love, how strong and true it is, how it can withstand so much for the disciples weren't exactly the paragon of faithfulness they weren't quick to believe and yet Jesus seeks them out, walks with them, breaks bread with them.

I think again to my brother and his bride. She has been through a lot – a mother who had twelve long years of succumbing to Alzheimers, cared for the whole time by family, at home... a first marriage for her that didn't hold up in the midst of all that stress. When Carl and Barbara were early into dating, Carl was in the hospital with a brain bleed for many days, and Barbara visited him regularly. She was there for my brother, flying east to be with us when our mother died. Unlike couples who marry at a young age, there was already this sense of love enduring, love seeing things through.

Upon my return home this week I had lesson number two in surprising encounter with the holy and it came in attending a breakfast gathering at the Norwell United Church of Christ. The conference, held this past Wednesday morning, was on churches and inclusion of people with special needs. The keynote speaker was Emily Colson, daughter to the well-known evangelical preacher Chuck Colson and mother to Max, a now 26 year old son with autism. Emily told her story, Max's story, talking about how, though a very faithful person herself, for a long time they didn't go to church, because it felt like there wasn't a place for Max at church. Max could be very verbal, and very boisterous, and sitting still wasn't at all his forte.

So they worked it backwards...when he was a young boy, maybe in middle school,

they started coming to coffee hour. Max did coffee hour well, loving the food and the interactions. After a while, after people had grown to know Max and be more comfortable with him, they moved to coming to worship for the closing hymn and benediction. Sometime later, they starting showing up a little further in. Max, expressive by nature, often took to dancing when the music played. With this slow and steady backwards approach, people were not only ready to make space for Max, but to celebrate that Max was part of them, part of the people of God.

I hadn't gone to this conference expecting it to be so powerful. There were on the panel two special needs adults, and in the audience many family members of special needs adults. There was a lot of voice cracking when people spoke. In fact, the gathering had a raw and honest quality to it that I found just stunning.

I could not help but leave the conference wondering who do we welcome here at our church? Who will we advocate for? Who will we make adjustments for?

Today we welcome fifteen new members. Such a celebration! We never know who will next come in our doors and want to be part of our shared life here. We never know who will teach us surprising new things about being the people of God.

The Emmaus Road story has power because it is still happening now. The spirit of God moves, seeking us out and bringing us to new places. Our defenses are stripped away, and eyes that are clouded by cynicism or hurt or sorrow, or preconceived notions about how things are opened up.

Emmaus Road experiences – These experiences where we find God or, where God finds us can happen here, and now anytime and maybe particularly when and where we least expect it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.