



**“Recognizing Jesus”**  
**Scripture – Luke 24:13-35**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, April 30, 2017**

If you visit the Holy Land, you can walk the same path Jesus walked. You can stroll through Nazareth and imagine what it was like for Jesus growing up in the little village. Standing in a small olive grove in Nazareth, I could not help but wonder what Jesus was like as a boy. When friends got into a scuffle, was he the peacemaker? Even as a child, did he stand up for those who were treated unfairly?

You can drive to Bethlehem where Jesus was born and Bethany where he visited his dear friends, Mary and Martha. You can sail the Sea of Galilee while reading gospel stories of Jesus calling fisherman to follow him, or you can imagine Jesus standing on its banks of black basalt rock inspiring the crowds that flocked to hear him.

Meandering the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem, a variety of emotions may wash over you as you envision Jesus entering the city to shouts of “Save us!” stomping into the Temple and toppling the tables of the moneychangers, gathering with his disciples for the Last Supper, and trudging the serpentine corridors with a cross beam on his back.

If you travel to the land of Jesus, you can transport yourself back 2,000 years when you step into the waters of the Jordan River or pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. You can visit Jericho and Capernaum and numerous places mentioned in the gospels. However, there is one place that will elude you: Emmaus.

At least three different sites claim to be Emmaus, but there is no consensus on the location of this village mentioned in today’s passage – the only time it is mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. Why can Emmaus not be pinpointed?

As we ponder this story, keep in mind that Luke compiled his gospel some 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He did not write his gospel as an historical account of the life and times of Jesus. Rather, he composed it for a community of faith comprised of second and third generation Christians. He penned it for people who had never laid their eyes on Jesus but who had experienced in some way or another, the risen Christ.

We celebrated Easter morning two weeks ago and pondered Easter evening last Sunday, but today’s story is located between the two. It begins on Easter afternoon and stretches into the evening.

Luke says that two followers of Jesus were walking to Emmaus attempting to make sense of both the glorious and grim moments of the past handful of days. Jesus made a triumphant entry into the Holy City, and despite the presence of the Roman army, his followers boldly called on Jesus to save them and courageously declared him

“King.” Their hopes skyrocketed as they envisioned the dawning of a new era – one in which corruption and violence were replaced by justice and peace. It must have been so thrilling that they had difficulty sleeping. Then, their high hopes were shattered when Jesus was arrested and their dreams were destroyed when he was hastily executed.

In your mind’s eye, can you envision these two followers of Jesus, their shoulders slumped and their feet dragging the dusty road as they moaned about the agonizing events?

If you have suffered a painful loss, you know it can be disorienting. Initially, our bodies buffer us from the severity of the agony by making it seem unreal. We hear ourselves saying, “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Closely nipping at the heels of denial is anger. We bitterly denounce whomever or whatever is to blame for our suffering.

It is not difficult to picture the two followers cursing the religious leaders and Roman officials for executing their master and crushing their hopes. Were the leaders so intoxicated with their positions of power they could not recognize Jesus as someone chosen by God? Were they so blinded by greed they could not accept his message to care for the poor?

I see the two followers fluctuating between disbelief and fury when a stranger comes near and walks alongside them. It is the resurrected Christ, but for some reason they do not recognize him. Our text is intentionally vague.

Jesus inquires about their animated discussion and they stop abruptly. Their haggard faces make it obvious they are stricken with grief. Then, the one whose name was Cleopas, is incredulous. He says, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what happened the past few days?”

When we suffer a painful loss, it is vital for us to talk about it. Sharing our burden with another makes it easier to bear, than carrying the full load alone. Jesus – ever the healer – encourages them to recite the details of the past week.

Immediately, the story spills out. They take turns telling it. “Jesus was a prophet who possessed remarkable gifts and extraordinary wisdom. We believed he was the one to liberate Israel, but he was condemned and crucified.” They went on to share the bewildering events. “Some women of our group astounded us. They went to the tomb this morning and found it empty.”

These two were skeptical of the women’s story. Even if the story were true, these two were engulfed by such despair that they had no room for good news. They may have thought the Romans played one last cruel trick on them and snatched the body.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed by darkness that it was nearly impossible to detect any light?

As they continue to walk, Jesus delivers the quintessential Bible lesson explaining all of the Scriptures that point to him. Yet, still, the two do not recognize their fellow traveler.

Eventually, the three arrive at their destination, Emmaus, but Jesus appears to be walking beyond it. They plead with Jesus, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening.”

Jesus remains and joins them for supper. At the table, he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. Then, the scales fall from their eyes and they recognize him. But the moment they identify him, he vanishes.

The two are ecstatic. They talk about how their hearts were stirred when Jesus illuminated the Scriptures. Despite the fact that it is evening and they had planned to spend the night in Emmaus, they rush back to Jerusalem. They find the other disciples and explain what happened to them on the road and how they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Did you catch the name of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? One was named Cleopas. Who was the other? Luke never names the second one. Why? One scholar says that is because the other one is you. “Luke left a blank space for us to fill in our names.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes when I am about to drift off to sleep, I wonder how many times I missed God’s presence during that day. Like my traveling companion, Cleopas, I may have been walking next to God, yet clueless to the divine presence.

Why can Emmaus not be pinpointed? Is it because the sands of time have long since erased it from the map and people’s memories? Or is it because – as one scholar (Marcus Borg) puts it – Emmaus is both nowhere and everywhere. Emmaus is not one specific piece of turf. It represents wherever people recognize the presence of God.

Our sanctuary is Emmaus. The island of Iona is Emmaus. I have discovered Emmaus while visiting someone in the hospital and while standing next to a coffin at a gravesite.

Certain places and situations awaken us to the divine. When have you been to Emmaus? Was it at the birth of a child? Sitting on a mountaintop? Singing Handel’s Messiah? Absorbed in an intense prayer? Perhaps in a moment like the one mentioned in today’s passage – breaking bread with friends.

I think we often miss God because we expect God to show up primarily in the mysterious and miraculous. We look for God exclusively in dramatic, life-saving events. But, as Frederick Buechner reminds us, “The sacred moments are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal...a stranger coming down the road behind us or a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our whole being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself.”<sup>2</sup>

It is rare for us to be aware of God’s presence. However, Jesus made it clear that when we feed someone who is hungry, when we visit someone who is ill or lonely, and when we welcome a stranger, we are ministering to Jesus. When we pray, when we reconcile a broken relationship, when we love as Jesus loved, we draw very, very close to God.

If your eyes are observant, your mind is alert, and your soul is expectant, you just might bump into our risen Lord.

## NOTES

1. Barbara Lundblad, “Moving and Standing Still,” April 28, 1996.
2. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 87–88