



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

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Emmaus

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Luke 24:13-35

It was that very Sunday, the day of all the commotion, when some of the women had said that they had seen him, the risen Jesus. That is today. The day that I ask you to imagine now that you are one of Jesus disciples. You and another disciple are leaving the sacred city of Jerusalem to head back to Emmaus. You are talking about all the things that happened during the past week.

Jesus riding into Jerusalem a week ago to the waving of palms and that strong sense that the deliverer had arrived.

His teaching in the Temple throughout the week. His feeding of the people, not this time with fishes and bread, but with the saving Word of God.

You talk about what happened on that Thursday evening. The other disciples gathered in the upper room with Jesus for a last meal. A time of prayer in the garden called Gethsemane. His arrest. His trial. And on Friday that incredibly gruesome crucifixion.

Saturday was a blur, a fog, because of the shock.

And then Sunday arrives. Sunday in Israel was the beginning of the new work week. Time to get back to normality, no matter what your grief, no matter what your pain.

Oh, there had been wild stories. Someone said that some of the women thought they had seen Jesus alive. But you knew better. Someone had just stolen his body. That's nothing to rejoice about. Just one more indignity on top of the pain that you would rather not ever have to experience. How, you ask yourself, how could you ever have been so gullible as to allow yourself to ever get on this primrose path? How could you have ever let your guard down long enough to really trust that God was going to something that new and different, that freeing through that remarkable character, Jesus.

So you and a companion head off from Jerusalem back to normality. You saunter out the western gate of the old city of Jerusalem walking the rugged hillsides on a path off to the west and tad to the north, for 7 miles, that will take you in three hours or more to a familiar place named Emmaus. On the way you have time to talk over the roller coaster events of the past three days; time to ruminate over all the events that led up to Jesus' very Real death and his Rumored resurrection, as you make your way to Emmaus.

I've been to Emmaus, myself. On a sabbatical in Sept. of 2004 I was staying in Roman Catholic educational institute on the south side of Jerusalem, about an hour's walk. Because of the intifada frightening off most tourists and students, the institute which should have held 120 students had dwindled to 5 priests, 2 nuns, one Islamic scholar, and myself- the token Protestant Christian. My group of nuns and priests and I drove the seven miles as the crow flies from Old Jerusalem to Emmaus in a quick 15 min. in a new, immaculate, white, air conditioned VW van on a twisting, turning highwayⁱ that follows the ancient route that armies have marched for millennia from the Mediterranean seacoast to the city of Jerusalem.

On the way we passed some of the most beautiful gardens I have ever seen at a Catholic church nearby, but when you arrive at Emmaus just a few hundred

yards away, there is no beauty at all. What you see is just rubble. The village there, known locally then by the name *Imwar*, had been inhabited by Palestinians for untold centuries, was bulldozed to the ground in 1967 by Israeli forces, who after capturing it, in order to provide a protected area surrounding that vital highway, made sure there would be no Palestinian resistance from that little village.

But the spiritual meaning of Emmaus couldn't be squelched by an Israeli bulldozer. For if you've ever really lived, you have been to Emmaus, too. And now I'm not talking about you as a disciple of the first century, but as a disciple of Jesus Christ in the 21st century. We have all been to Emmaus.

You see, Emmaus is more than a place on map, a particular plot of land. Emmaus is way of being, a way of reacting to the world.

Have you ever gone to watch a movie at the theater, not to take in some work of art or for the enjoyment of it, but in order to escape the troubles of your day? Then you've been to Emmaus.

Have you ever gone to a party with no interest at all in getting to know the other people, no desire to expand it your web of relationships, but you went to the party simply to get yourself so buzzed on alcohol that you could forget for awhile the losses that you suffered? Then that party was your Emmaus.

Have you ever hopped in your car and headed Downtown, or to the Domain or the outlet malls in Round Rock or San Marcos, and tried to **spend** yourself into feeling better—because you were confused, angry, hurt? Then rename Dillard's, Emmaus.

Have you ever gone home at the end of the day, locked your front door, closed your blinds, ignored the telephone ringing and the pile deskwork calling for you, and lost yourself in a TV show, a movie, or book? Then your home, all of our

homes, could be called Emmaus, because **Emmaus is the place that we go to hide from the brokenness within that we feel.**ⁱⁱ

Emmaus is wherever we go, whatever we do, in order to forget for a while that the world we live in can be hard and brutal and can smash our dreams and ideals as easily as an elephant crushes a grasshopper. We go to Emmaus to get away.

But we certainly aren't the first to try. With the death of Charleton Heston yesterday, we may - with the help of his acting- remember Moses who had fled the rath of Pharaoh for his killing of an Egyptian taskmaster and who then settled in Midian, for what he hoped would be a life of oblivion and peace. But you will remember that Moses had a run in with a bush that was on fire and yet was not consumed. And from that bush came a call to lead forth the people at Israel from bondage to freedomⁱⁱⁱ. Moses could run from God but he could not hide.

Or consider Jonah who clearly heard the word of the Lord say to him, "Go at once to in Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. You know what happens next. In his escape him he is found to be the cause of the ship floundering and offers himself to be thrown overseas to his certain doom. Instead, a huge large fish swallows up Jonah and after three days and three nights spews him up onto the dry land, safe.^{iv} Jonah could run from God, but he could not hide.

In the book of First Kings we have the story of Elijah the prophet who is just triumphed in a battle with the priests of Baal, but in doing so incurred the wrath of Queen Jezebel who has vowed to kill Elijah. Rather than face her, Elijah gets up and fled the entire length of Israel from the very north at Carmel all the way to the edge of the desert in the home of the Patriarchs, Beer Sheba. There defeated

spiritually, he asks God to just take his life. He hears the Lord respond to him, “what are you doing here, Elijah?”^v Elijah could run but he could not hide.

In each case, these spiritual ancestors who once were strong in faith, towers of strength, who first fled from a difficult situation, and who then ran up against their own human limits; who came to grips with their own brokenness, all this, before they could once again be led by God’s Spirit.

So it is, that in Emmaus I don’t think that it was just a coincidence that as Cleopas and the other disciple saw Jesus holding the broken bread, that it was right then that their eyes were opened. It was the brokenness, like the brokenness that was defining their very lives in that very moment: in seeing these pieces of broken bread in Jesus’ hands, they finally saw that this was the risen Christ who holds all of our broken dreams, our broken relationships, and our broken bodies. All of it is held in his own brokenness.

That is part of what is proclaimed every time we come to the Lord’s table. And every once in a while as we celebrate communion, the veil falls for us, too. Then, we don’t just say it. You know it. We feel it to be true, real, actual.

One of the foremost contributors in our in our Monday evening Bible study curriculum, Dr. Marcus Borg, writes,

“Emmaus happens again and again. Emmaus is a story about meeting Jesus again for the first time. Easter is about the Living Lord who journeys with us whether we recognize him or not. But, there are moments when we become aware of a Presence. There are moments when we know he is with us. That he lives. That we, too, are gripped and grasped by life, the gift of the Living God who again and again shatters the darkness, breaks the chains

of oppression, overcomes the worst that evil can do. The God Whose light broke forth on Easter morning and shines and will shine until all is well." ^{vi}

There is good news here. Good news, indeed. Because no matter how it is that we seek to lose ourselves and hide from our pain in those places of Emmaus, the good news is that it is right there in the midst of are trying to hide my we are most likely to be found by God.

So, go ahead and run to Emmaus from time to time. Give it a try. You are in good company!

But just know that when you are playing hide and seek with God, God always wins.

But then again, so do you!

ⁱThe following is from "The Road to Emmaus" by James M. Wall in the *Christian Century* December 21, 1977, p. 1182.

The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. A few days later I traveled over a different West Bank road, this time from Jerusalem to Latrun, a journey taken to gain perspective on the terrain over which so many previous battles have been fought and where future boundary lines may some day be argued. My attention had been drawn to Latrun by books I had read on the battles fought between Israel and the Arabs in 1946-48. On three separate occasions, Jewish armies tried to capture Latrun, a village at the bottom of a mountain range leading to Jerusalem.

Another British fort stands in front of the Catholic monastery at Latrun; despite several frontal attacks, the Israelis were unable to capture the fort and thus failed to gain control of a vital link between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This defeat might have caused the fall of Jerusalem; but the Israelis cut an alternative road around the mountains to the south, and later built another road during the 1948-67 period when the West Bank, and the road through Latrun, were controlled by Jordan.

The road that approaches Latrun from the northeast winds through the mountain range along the same route followed by Joshua in his conquest of the Amorite kings (Josh. 10:1-15). Here, the Scriptures report, Joshua commanded the sun and moon to stand still at Gibeon and in the Valley of Aijalon. This valley is crucial to control of the center of this country, today as in Joshua's time, for it is a wide span of fertile farmland nestled between mountain ranges reaching west to the sea and east to Jerusalem and the cities of Ramallah and Nablus.

Driving through the Valley of Aijalon, we passed fields to our left covered now with prickly pear cactus and scrub trees. Before 1967 there were Arab villages here. Their presence appears to haunt the valley because the casual observer at first assumes the land has always been empty. The Arabs know better. The cacti that grow in definite patterns on these hills are not indigenous to the area, but were planted as hedges between farm huts bulldozed by the Israelis as a security measure after their 1967 military victory. Farmers who once lived and worked here are now refugees in Jordan or Lebanon they and their children are restless to return to land they have lost.

One of three villages destroyed here was Imwar (Emmaus), one of two possible sites for a recorded resurrection appearance of Jesus. A church marking the traditional site still stands; the village is gone. An Israeli explained the bulldozing policy to me in this way: "We thought we would have to give up all the land we gained in the Six-Day War, so we cleared our borders of hostile villages. If we had known that ten years later we would still have all this territory, we would not have torn them down. It was for security."

But people do live near Imwar now. A Jewish settlement, Canada Park, has been constructed from funds raised by Jewish groups in Canada. This settlement was opened in April 1976, and it includes around 1,000 acres from the bulldozed villages of Yalu, Imwar and Beit Nuba, about a fourth of which is orchard land. A nation that fought four wars to gain control of the Valley of Aijalon does not intend to see this strategic land bargained away at some international peace conference.

I drove away from the former villages of Imwar, Yuba and Beit Nuba with mixed emotions. If a government is charged with the security of its people, then its actions must be understood in part as following from what it assumes to be in the best interests of its people. And after ten years, Israel is still not sure that it can trust the world community to provide its security in this relatively small strip of land between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean Sea.

ⁱⁱ This idea from F. Beuchner's sermon, "Emmaus."

ⁱⁱⁱ Ex. 3

^{iv} Jonah 1

^v I Kings 19

^{vi} Marcus Borg quoted at his "Jesus at 2000" conference.