

Sermon: On the Walk to Emmaus

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 19, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever been on a journey where the walk is more important than the destination, where you are joined by the unexpected—a stranger in stranger things—where your eyes were kept from seeing, clearly and fully, until it is revealed in a sacramental moment where mystery and memory intersects, and your heart becomes strangely warm?

The road to Emmaus is precisely such a journey for Cleopas and his friend, in a post-resurrection account of the risen Christ, a journey of many twists and turns where they never actually arrived at the intended destination, yet the community of faith is richer for it nevertheless.

Emmaus was a little known village outside of Jerusalem, about 60 stadia west, or 10-12 km depending on how one measures the *stadion* to be. Two little known disciples of Jesus, Cleopas and his unnamed friend, were walking towards Emmaus, while “*talking with each other about all these things that had happened*” (Luke 24:13)

They were in Jerusalem during the Passover feast, as good and law-abiding Jews would be. They were attracted to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they considered to be a prophet, mighty in word and deed. They had hoped that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, long prophesied to come to save Israel, to deliver the chosen people of God from hands of the Gentiles, from oppression of ruthless succession of empires. They had hoped.

However, their chief priests and religious leaders did not share the same hope. They had opposed Jesus right from the start, had questioned his authority, challenged his teachings, tarnished his name, and in a final stroke, during Passover no less, they handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

Just when all hope seemed to be gone, they were told of words, three days later, wild tales from idle women most likely, that Jesus could not be found in the tomb, that he is no longer in the land of the dead, but is walking in the land of the living— that he is alive.

Some of the disciples went to the tomb, to see for themselves the truth of these incredible accounts but could not fully verify. Confusion and fear had gripped the remaining disciples, no one knew what to do. So Cleopas and his friend decided to get out of dodge, to escape whatever danger may yet be brewing in Jerusalem. They were dejected, they want nothing more to do with trouble.

They weren't brave like Peter, smart like James, faithful like John; they weren't part of the inner circle, the decision makers. They were always peripheral, and in the periphery they shall remain, and out the backdoor they went. Out of the city, into obscurity, travelling with haste and regret towards Emmaus, a town of no importance.

Just as they were talking and discussing on this road of broken dreams, a stranger draws near, a stranger their eyes were kept from recognizing, recognizing the truth that the embodiment of their expectations and hope for liberation walks beside them!

We the readers are not told of the source of their blindness. But as it often happens in a well-told story, gaps in a detailed narrative serves as a mirror to us, it draws us in, helps us to locate ourselves on the road this broken dream. Did God intentionally restrain their vision? Who among us have not felt blindsided by events beyond our comprehension, beyond our control. Who among us have not wondered if God was in fact not in control? And if God was, why did God not act?

The blindness of these two dejected disciples is ours. We too have been made myopic by misery, short-sighted by suspicion, and forgetful by fear. If a stranger who draws near to us today is in fact Jesus, would we do better? Would we recognize the risen Christ walking alongside of us?

So the stranger draws near and walks with them, and inquires, innocently enough, "What are you discussion with each other while you walk along?" Why..."Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?", responded Cleopas. To which the stranger replies, again feigning innocence, "What things?" Well, "the things about Jesus of Nazareth!" So they explain and unload in rapid succession, in details, all that is troubling their heart.

Then the stranger says to them, "*Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*" (v.25-26) And as if the stranger pulls out suddenly a pocket Torah scroll, complete with the Law of Moses and the Prophets, armed with

a full curriculum of Israel's faith tradition, the two disciples were thus treated to the full history of the messianic hope.

Allow me to quote this beautifully crafted paragraph, authored by Shannon Michael Pater, writing for the "Pastoral Perspective on Luke 24:13-35", in *Feasting on the Word*, describing the hope that yearns for fruition. "It is a history of kairos, not clocks and calendars. Every blossom blooms in its own season; some come when snow is still on the ground, and others flourish in the heat of the summer. Easter does not always come in three days. Stones are rolled away, but sometimes we stay in the tomb." Yes, stones are rolled away, Christ has gone ahead, so what are we doing still in the tomb, fretting away as if we would find answers in the land of the dead?

As the story continues, the stranger walks on ahead as if he is continuing on his journey. Out of hospitality and perhaps a sense of sheer wonder there may yet be unfinished business with this stranger, the two disciples urged him strongly, saying, "*Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.*" (v.29)

The words of this invitation thus became the inspiration to this beautifully crafted hymn "Abide with me", sung to the tune of Eventide:

"Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide;
the darkness depends, Lord, with me abide:
when other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless oh abide with me."

The hymn was written in 1847 by the Scottish Anglican minister Henry Francis Lyte as he was dying from tuberculosis at the age of 54. He wrote it as a personal prayer for God to stay with him, in life as well as in death. How beautiful is that?

Coming back to the this walk to Emmaus, as incredible as it may seem, the two disciples of Jesus still could not recognize the Lord walking alongside of them. In a scene whereby most of us in the Christian faith would understand as sharing a eucharistic meal, "*Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*" (v.30) All that is missing were the words of the Lord saying, "Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me." Nevertheless, the disciples remembered, their eye were opened, they finally recognized him, and inexplicably, Jesus vanished from their sight, yet another holy mystery.

How should we make sense of this story? We might be tempted to hold it out at a distance, critique it, particularly the two disciples, on how foolish they were in not being able to recognize the risen Christ. We could do that. Might I suggest a better way, by being vulnerable enough to have our name inserted in the place of Cleopas's unnamed travelling companion. By being immersed in the story, we may yet to experience the full wonder of their amazement—whereby broken bread nurses the broken faith, and in turn nourish the courage needed to leave behind the broken and empty tomb.

The rays of Easter's sunrise now shine, our slow hearts now strangely warm. "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?*" (v.32)

The testimonial of the women by the empty tomb thus becomes theirs as well as ours, as we rush back to the community of faith, and rush out to tell as many as we could find: We have seen the risen Lord! He walks alongside of us, teaches us still, and opens our eyes and our hearts in the breaking of the bread. Hallelujah! Amen!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**