

The Emmaus Way

“On April 1, 1977, [the British newspaper,] *The Guardian* published a seven-page supplement devoted to the previously unknown island state of San Serriffe.”¹ Readers responded enthusiastically, calling the paper’s offices for more information and flooding travel agencies with requests for reservations on this previously undiscovered vacation spot. The descriptions painted scenes of exotic cultures and pristine beaches paired with new, air-conditioned hotels and modern roads. It sounded like the perfect get-away, the ideal destination. There was a catch: San Serriffe does not exist. It was all an elaborate April Fool’s joke.

One would think that the date on the top of each page of the supplement and at the top of every page of the paper would have tipped people off that something might be amiss, but the hoax was extremely elaborate. Its pages were filled with ads from Texaco, Kodak, and Guinness. It looked very real, and perhaps even more significantly, the readers at some level very much wanted it to be real. They wanted to find a warm, welcoming place where they could get away from it all, an escape, the perfect get-away.

The two disciples we meet this morning are also looking to get away from it all as well. It is still Easter. Just a few hours have passed since the women returned from the tomb with news that seems too good to be true, “an idle tale,” a load of hooey.² Luke tells us point blank that the eleven do not believe them. Luke also tells us that Peter has gone to the tomb and has come away amazed, but at this point the good news that we associate with Easter morning is still just a rumor. So, Jesus catches up with these two and walks with them as they head to Emmaus. Because of this account in Luke’s gospel, Emmaus has become an idealized, almost magical place in the minds of many, but in the first century, Emmaus was nothing special, not a destination-vacation locale or an important commercial hub. Emmaus was an unassuming spot, about seven miles outside of Jerusalem. No record remains of Emmaus today. Sunday, as you probably know, was the first day of the week in Jewish practice. These two are heading out to Emmaus on the equivalent of our Monday morning, the day when the world gets back to business. While we do not know their reason for heading to Emmaus, Cleopas and his

¹ http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/Hoaxipedia/San_Serriffe

² Luke 24: 11

companion may have found Emmaus appealing simply because it was not Jerusalem. It stands apart, removed from the events of the past week and the Passover.

Frederick Buechner says that we all have a tendency to head to Emmaus in some way, shape, or form. As he describes it,

[Emmaus] is the place where we spend much of our lives...the place where we go in order to escape...wherever we can escape our troubles, at least for a while. We can escape the job we did not get or the friend we hurt.³

It is any place we go when the world gets to be too much. Emmaus can be television, the Internet, food, shopping, road trips, even memory lane. Anywhere and anything that helps us get away from it all, whatever “it all” entails.

When Jesus meets these two, they are discussing the events of the past week and weekend. While they are putting physical distance between Jerusalem and themselves, they are still very close to the drama, and to their dashed hopes. They are astounded by the stranger’s ignorance about Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. The account they share is familiar; we have heard it repeated several times in the past few weeks, but one phrase captures the despair these two are feeling: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”⁴ *We had hoped*; few phrases capture a sense of disappointment or loss as fully as this one: we had hoped.

In the midst of recounting the events, in the depth of their disappointment and their confusion, Jesus—still a stranger in their eyes—responds not with sympathy but frustration:

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?⁵

I’m tempted to pull Jesus aside and suggest that he not be so harsh with these two. They’ve been through a lot in the past 72 hours. Perhaps he could be a bit gentler? But Jesus had and has hopes, too. Jesus doesn’t express frustration with them for not believing the women, or even angels, but with their refusal to have listened to him and to the ongoing story of the people of God. They had only heard what they wanted to hear and hoped what

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 86

⁴ Luke 24: 21

⁵ Luke 24: 25-26

they wanted to hope. Events did not happen as they had anticipated. Jesus did not gallop into town in a white hat on a white horse and kick the bad guys out. He did not zap his persecutors or defy his executioners. He died, and not just any death but the shameful, shame-filled death of an outlaw. This was not at all what they had hoped. But rather than throw up his hands in disgust and start walking away, Jesus keeps walking with them and tells them again what they should already know.

Either because they are captivated by his teaching or because they want to be hospitable, Cleopas and his friend invite this stranger to stay with them. This is no half-hearted invitation: “They [urge] him strongly.”⁶ My hunch is that they want to hear more. They want him to stay close and keep talking, keep explaining. In his words things begin to make sense in a way that they had not before, especially over the previous few days. Then at table he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. In this very simple action at a humble table in this nowhere place, they suddenly recognize who sits with them. This is the “A-ha” moment to end all “A-ha” moments! Now, it all makes sense. Now, they understand the events that took place and the words he spoke both on the road and before. Now, they get it. Now, there is no need to stay in Emmaus. Now that they have heard what they have heard and seen what they have seen, they want to go and tell, to seek out and share.

There is no shame in heading to Emmaus. Over the past two years—and even before—we have all needed ways to take a break from the headlines, the noise, and the very real grief, stress, and sadness that insist on finding us no matter who or where we are. It is not a bad thing to want to find a waystation where we can catch our breath and find space to heal. We need sanctuary; we need Emmaus. And yet, Emmaus is not the ultimate destination, nor is this sanctuary. The church has never been intended as a place to escape from the world in any permanent way; instead, it is the place where we are renewed to serve in the world. In times of worship, prayer, and proclamation, we gather to be reminded whose we are and what we are called to do. And we always come in in order to go out. Our experiences in this place are different each week. By the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, the preacher offers a word that rings true, a friend stops to ask how our week has gone, and we see a smile we didn’t know we had missed. Week in and week out the choir and other gifted musicians share the Good News in ways the spoken word alone cannot capture. On baptism Sundays, we

⁶ Luke 24: 29

meet the Lord of Life in the water. On communion Sundays, we encounter the Living God in the bread, and in the cup. Still there are other moments in here and out there—a hug, a phone call, a hymn, a tear, a handshake, a beam of sunshine through a window, a stranger’s kind word, a baby’s cry, a sigh—moments when the risen Christ catches us unawares. In those moments, fleeting as they may be, Christ comes to us, opens our eyes, welcomes us again into the family, and then we recognize him. Moments like those send us rushing out to others to share the amazing Good News with them that they too might come and see what we have seen.

Still there are those other moments, those times when we start to wonder if what we have been told can really be true. Those are the moments when we long to run away—to Emmaus, to San Serriffe, to the good old days, to anywhere but here. And then we are faced with the reality that there is no San Serriffe. San Seriffe does not exist. And the world is always with us. The great good news is that Jesus does not wait to meet us in San Seriffe or Emmaus or in any other perfect faraway paradise. Whether we recognize him or not Jesus meets us here, even when here is the last place we want to be. In those moments, Jesus comes alongside us and lets us set the pace. He walks patiently and faithfully beside us and reminds us of God’s ongoing love story with God’s wayward children and God’s unfailing hope for those wayward children, including us. In those moments, Jesus walks with us, Jesus waits, Jesus pauses with us in Emmaus, and time and time again, Jesus offers us the bread of life. In those moments, the mysterious guest becomes the most gracious of hosts. He makes room for us at the table, he nourishes us with the bread, he opens our eyes, and he readies us for the journey back out into God’s broken and beloved world in his name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.