

April 30, 2017 Dan Crump

As long as this morning's gospel lesson is, it needs a bit of setup. Jesus has now been dead three days. His body was laid in a tomb belonging to a man named Joseph from a town called Arimathea. The women who had come from Galilee with Jesus, among them, Mary Magdalene, Johanna, and Mary the mother of James, were present at the burial. They saw how Jesus' body was laid in the tomb. They left to prepare spices and ointments, and after resting on the sabbath, had come to administer their preparations.

Of course, we know what happened. They arrived to an empty tomb and the angelic message that He is risen. Hurrying back to the apostles, they reported what they had seen and heard only to be met with dismissal, "an idle tale," they called it. I will set aside the sexist implications of men dismissing the lived experience of women outright other than to say, "Yeah, that's a thing."

At least, Peter, to his credit, ran to the tomb to check out the story and saw the empty linens. He came away "amazed" as the NRSV translates. The Greek word chosen by the author is *thaumazon*, which translates to wonder or to admire. The King James Version, which in this case seems more to the point, translates Peter as "wondering *in* himself."

Now hear the word of the Lord:

"Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'

He asked them, 'What things?'

They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a

vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

Then he said 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?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.'

So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

This is the word of the Lord. . .

"The Road to Emmaus." It is a familiar and beloved story. If you are a lifelong faithful church-goer, you have probably heard it at least once for every year you have lived. Two of Jesus' followers are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus lost in conversation. One commentator, imagining a scenario, suggests that the two have just witnessed the dismissal of the eyewitness accounts of the women returning from the tomb. Already feeling sad and disgusted by the apostles' refusal to be present with Jesus in his agony and death, the utter disregard of the report from the tomb forces these two even further to the margins to the point where, feeling they have lost their place altogether, they have to walk away.<sup>1</sup>

There is little if any agreement as to exactly where they were walking. There is no existing place today that bears the name Emmaus. The search is complicated by several enduring manuscripts of the gospel that locate it as far as 15 miles from Jerusalem more than twice the

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<sup>1</sup> Goss, Robert E., et al, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, SCM-Canterbury, London, 2006, p. 545

distance our text states, but those versions were disregarded in the construction of our modern Bible because a 30 mile round trip on foot, while possible, would not leave much daylight to do anything else. One possible, and perhaps useful, reading, then, is that these two were on the road to nowhere.

The village of Emmaus appears only one other place in scripture, if the apocryphal texts are considered as such. First Maccabees, which is concerned with the time Israel was under the thumb of Alexander's empire, tells the story of a brilliant military rout of the Greek army by Israel at a place called Emmaus. It could be the two were intending to visit a time in the past when Israel's hoped-for redemption seemed more at hand. Of course, since the past is only in past, they were still headed nowhere. In either case, they could not stay in Jerusalem, and with the death of Jesus they were farther from their hoped-for redemption than they had ever been.

We can get a sense of their situation by looking at the words the gospel author chose to describe their reaction to the news from the tomb. Remember, Peter was amazed, when he saw the empty linens, or as the KJV translated it, he "wondered in himself." These two were, as our translation tells it, astounded. Amazed? Astounded? Sounds like a wash, doesn't it? Until we look at the original language the author used to tell the story. The word describing the two disciples' reaction was *ex-est-e-san*. It means to displace, to throw out of position, to be carried away with wonder, to be put beside oneself. Wherever the news left Peter (this story is not really about him), it was a very different place than these two found themselves in. In fact, these two found themselves *displaced*, that is, in no place at all.

Back in seminary, I was struck by the possibility of an alternative to the familiar word, utopia. It means no place, literally, u- meaning 'no' and -topia meaning place, but it is used to refer to a place that is hoped-for, searched-for, as if it would exist only if we could just find it. And our culture is defined by that search. We are obsessed with "the road." If this story were made into a movie, it would star Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, and they would ultimately meet Dorothy Lamour on "The Road to Emmaus." Perhaps, if you are like me, you tune in to the news from Washington on any given day and can't resist the idea that we, too, are on "the road to a *meh-uss*."

Have you noticed? Everything that matters lies somewhere up ahead. Limitless economic growth, personal development, social justice, even spirituality are dependent upon pursuing one path or another just over the horizon. As the Psalmist says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." My path. My trajectory. We ask, "Where are you from?," "Where am I going?" and of course, the all-important question, "Are we there yet?"

Actually, it isn't the road so much as the destination that we are obsessed with. If we could simply eliminate the time and distance between us and our destination, we would. The space in

between has become a kind of no-man's land in which the only sin for which we require forgiveness is the failure to make it shorter even if by a few seconds. That, in case you wondered, is why the Cinnabons at the airport have no calories. It is why those people who beg for money at stop lights usually look so frustrated. It is also why the protestors who stop traffic on freeways are so effective at infuriating drivers and so ineffective at eliciting support for their cause. From the perspective of such people and causes that need and truly deserve our support, it must seem that we busy ourselves for no other purpose than to justify our ignoring them, and I am not one to say they are wrong.

The problem lies in the hope that our troubles are tied to this place and if we leave here to go there, to find utopia, our troubles will be behind us. Mulling over this dilemma, it occurred to me, what if we changed the prefix, u-, meaning no, to a-, meaning without, as in a-theism or a-gnostic. Whereas utopia designates a place that cannot exist until we find it (or take it from someone else), atopia would designate something like placelessness, where the very notion of place itself would have no meaning. It would describe the situation of a homeless person who has permanently given up the hope that she will ever sleep under a roof that she can call her own. It would describe the situation of the one who, unlike the foxes who have holes or the birds who have nests, has no place to lay his head.

And it would perfectly describe the situation our two travelers find themselves in. Is it any wonder that this is where they happen upon Jesus? Is it any wonder that this is where Jesus makes his first appearance after being resurrected in the full glory of his true nature?

In this place that is no place, Jesus meets them and asks what troubles have them so lost in conversation. And so lost, they are. After listening to them describe this terrible situation in which they find themselves, Jesus calls them foolish. Now, this word the author uses is very different from the word the apostles used to dismiss the women earlier in the story. The word is a-noetoi. There is that prefix a- again! This time in front of the word that translates as mind or thinking.

By calling them foolish Jesus is not dismissing them, but reminding them that they have a head and that they should use it. Weren't you paying attention? Did you not know that the path you set upon when you chose to follow me, the path that was declared by all those prophets you grew up reading, leads nowhere but right here, smack in the middle of a dirt road between a place you cannot go back to and a place that only exists in memory, if at all. He says, "Oh, how foolish you are." Can you hear the compassion in this voice that returned from the grave to meet these travelers, lost, in the middle of nowhere?

"As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on." Where was he headed? Don't you wonder? It isn't Jerusalem. That was back the way they

had come. No, he was continuing on the road. But these two foolish ones ask him to join them for dinner. Why not? A guy's gotta eat. It wasn't until Jesus broke the bread that they finally heard what he had been saying since they left Galilee all those years, all those dirt roads ago.

The Bible scholar Robert E. Goss says, "The disciples recognize their lives in the bread. Jesus takes the bread, blesses their experiences of brokenness, pain, exile, and alienation, and transforms the bread of their lives into his body. The breaking of the bread creates them into church, calling them to become the eschatological body of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Get this. At the breaking of the bread, Jesus transforms these two exiles, these two outsiders into the very definition of what it means to be inside, that is, in communion as the body of Christ.

As he suddenly vanishes, they look at each other and say, presumably in unison, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road. . .?" One of the pastors at this week's text study suggested the missing piece in worship today is heartburn. I think she is right, but maybe it is only possible when we are pushed out of place, rendered homeless and placeless, when "wondering in ourselves" as Peter was still able to do is no longer possible.

"That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem." They realized that as the body of Christ, they were precisely what they thought they had been forced to leave. Just as Jesus brought the wisdom of the road to two at that table in Emmaus, they brought it to the eleven who stayed behind in Jerusalem. "The Lord has risen indeed!" Can you imagine the sparkle in their eyes as they said to Simon Peter, "and you have seen him, too. He called you out of yourself, he called you out to the road, but you didn't go."

Once again, it is a long gospel reading but I must include the following verse, verse 36, "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" I am intrigued by the possibility that these two travelers brought Jesus' presence, the bodily proof of his resurrection, not to mention the vindication of the women who had been summarily dismissed by the men, into that gathering that day. I have no doubt that these two young people, Kate and Davis, have brought Jesus' presence into our midst by their encounter with need the depth of which surpasses their, and possibly our ability to meet it.

The truth is that we are on this road and we have always been. This congregation is on the road from saying goodbye to our former pastor to welcoming someone new to our pulpit, but we do not know when that will happen or who it will be. Perhaps we can learn from this gospel lesson that our faith is not in the one who waits for us at the end, but the one who meets us and walks with us on

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<sup>2</sup> Goss, Robert E. *ibid*, p. 545

the way. May we have the courage to leave the safety of our plans and expectations, and may God grant that our eyes can recognize those who meet us on the road.