

Jesus Will Meet You on the Road of Your Disappointment
Luke 24:13-35

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November 29, 2020

While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Lk. 24:15-16

The Road to Emmaus may seem a peculiar place to begin the Season of Advent, but it gets straight into our experience in ways more traditional Advent routes do not.

There are three facts about the two disciples who walked the Emmaus Road, and each one of these facts has its parallel in our contemporary experience. We are looking now just at the first part of the Emmaus Road story. There is a tendency to hurry to the end where there is joy and gladness, just as there is a tendency to want to hurry through Advent thoughts and get quickly to Christmas themes. But the Advent-related facts I want to show you today, the facts that parallel our own experience, are all in the first part of the story before Jesus arrives to join the two disciples on their journey. The three facts are these.

Calvary is behind these people.

Jesus, so far as these two disciples know, is altogether a person of the past. He has lived. He has taught. He was crucified. And he died. Jesus, so far as they knew, was gone from the face of the earth. His obituary had been written and he was relegated to the past. These two disciples had liked what Jesus had to say when he was alive. They liked his teaching about morality and character and politics; and they appreciated what he had to say about God and heaven and prayer and all things religious. But all of that was for the record books now. Jesus, so far as they knew, was in the irretrievable past.

That much has a real parallel in our experience. We have, of course, the platitudes that speak of Jesus as our contemporary. We like to say, especially when attendance is low, "Where two or three are gathered in his name, there Christ is present with them." We like to hear his promise, "Lo, I am with you to the close of the age." But platitudes aside, in our practical thinking Jesus is largely a figure of the past. We tend to talk more of what he did than what he does, of what happened to him than of what happens because of him, of what he said than of what he says. In much of our practical imagining Jesus is a figure of the first century, a personality in history who lived in the past.

These people have heard about Easter but they are not yet convinced about it.

The episode along the Emmaus Road took place toward evening on the first Easter. These two disciples had heard that some from their group were saying something astounding had happened that morning. They had heard reports of the empty tomb. They had heard testimony about the Resurrection. But they themselves had no first-hand experience to go on and they had yet to make up their minds to believe any of it. The Resurrection was something they had heard about but were not sure they could believe.

That, too, has real parallel in our experience. The church proclaims the Resurrection but belief in the afterlife remains an open question in the hearts of many, even the most faithful. I once participated in a preaching conference under the topic “Preaching the Resurrection.” I was shocked to find that a number of the clergy present did not believe in the Resurrection of Jesus. The Apostle Paul once said to the Corinthian congregation, “How can some of you say there is no resurrection?” I suspect that church and a number of churches today answer back, “How can you say there is?” How many come to Advent having heard of Easter, but not sure that it is really real?

All manner of disappointment was plain to these people.

These people were disappointed and what made their disappointment so severe was that they were disappointed in Jesus. Their faith failed them. The expectations they had gathered around Jesus did not pan out as they had planned them to. “We had hoped,” they said, “we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” But the very thing they wanted Jesus to do and that they prayed for him to do never came to pass.

That has real parallel in our experience, too. Everyone has a prayer that wasn’t answered, a plea to God that wasn’t responded to. Someone we wanted kept safe fell into harm; someone we wanted healed stayed sick and died; some misfortune we wanted to be strengthened against broke through our defenses and got the better of us. Disappointments and sorrows swarm around us, and we hang our heads low to say, “We had hoped God would do something to help us.”

Well, that description of the Emmaus Road disciples matches us to a fare-thee-well. Calvary was behind them and it is behind us. We know the story of Jesus but we wonder how to make something that happened so long ago matter and be relevant today. Easter was unclear to them and it is often unclear to us. We have heard the Easter stories but they seem too good to be true and so difficult to prove. Disappointment was plain to them and it is plain to us. Our highest hopes and dreams and plans never seem to measure up to the situation even when we do our best to bring God into the mix.

This is who we are as we start the Advent Season. This is who we are as we light our little candle against the deep and expansive background of this present darkness.

All that is true. We are on the early steps of the Emmaus Road. But – and this is the point – the Advent promise is that Christ Jesus will come to you as he came to the disciples along that road. He will come to the road you are on. He will come in some way that is hidden. He will look like he is moving away from you but he will respond to your invitation, and your invitation will put you in a better position to see him make himself known.

What should you do in the meantime? Keep trudging along even with every doubt and uncertainty you have. Stay in community with one another. Give voice to your disappointments. Don’t hold them in. Welcome the stranger you may encounter along the road. And invite Jesus to be part of your life, and surely the time will come when Christ will open your eyes to his living presence.