

“The Fellowship of Burning Hearts”

Introduction: Last week we joined in with two disciples as they made the journey back to their home, in a place called Emmaus, following the shattering events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. We saw how the risen Jesus joined them on the way and ministered to their story of broken dreams by filling them with his larger story of broken bread.

This morning, we want to consider their return trip to Jerusalem and as we do so, to see how this overall account illustrates, through its journey motif, the key moments in our spiritual life, from a personal encounter with Jesus, to joining a fellowship of others who are on the way, to extending the good news into the community and world beyond us.

As we will highlight, this movement actually tracks well with, and helps put flesh on, our vision statement. It reads: *Receiving and extending the hospitality of Jesus as we connect with God, one another, and our community.*

Let's first enter this story once more. [READ]

I. Journey Inward – Connecting with God

A. As we eavesdrop again on their initial conversation, this pair was struggling to make sense of what they had just seen in Jerusalem, and how their hopes and dreams had now died, given that Jesus was now dead. This they shared with an unrecognized traveler, who proved to be such a good listener, as well as teacher, that they invited him to stay with them longer once they had reached their home.

B. We then noticed how, at the table, this good listener and teacher turned from guest to host, and as he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. They recognized at last who he was. He had been able to draw them into the context of God's larger story, interpreting the promises of God as being fulfilled in him, in particular his death and resurrection, that it all started to make sense, causing their “hearts to burn.”

C. What this pair experienced was the hospitality of Jesus – his gracious and open welcome into the kingdom of God and the life that comes through his death and resurrection. It was a hospitality that was associated with a table – the Lord's table – at which we learn about the offer and means of forgiveness, and are invited to experience reconciliation with God, ourselves, one another, and creation. It was a hospitality that connected them to God, and revealed that to truly live one must first “die,” to anything that blocks the offer of a new life in Christ.

D. This journey inward, we can call it, is where the spiritual life begins. It often contains growth in terms of how we see Jesus. Here, this pair moved from seeing him as stranger, to traveling companion, to teacher, to guest, to host, and finally as Messiah and resurrected Lord.

II. Journey Together – Connecting with One Another

A. But the journey doesn't stop there. It continues as we journey, and therefore grow, together, with others. Yes, Jesus rescues us from our sin as individuals and into a personal

relationship with him. At the same time, he rescues us into a family, into a fellowship called the church, which reveals that we're not meant to walk this journey without others walking with us.

1. We see this in a couple of ways in our text. First, this pair made the choice to walk together, and not alone. This is significant, for they could have decided that what they had been through in Jerusalem was so personal, so traumatic, so confounding that they didn't want to talk about it with anyone. Or, they could've decided to talk about the weather or what kind of season the Emmaus football team had been having – talking about anything but what they had just experienced. But they went there, talking about all the things that had happened and their perplexity and disappointment and discouragement in it all. And it seems that somehow, given their willingness to walk together and open up to another about what was going on at a heart level, that made space for Jesus to come near. Walking together, and not alone, is a critical and life-giving part of the spiritual journey.

2. The second way the text shows this to us is when, after the time at the table with Jesus, the pair got up “at once” and, it seems, virtually sprinted the seven miles back to Jerusalem where they couldn't wait to share what they had experienced with other Christ-followers, who had, they discovered, “assembled together” in order to talk about and process what they had experienced! What we have is a whole fellowship of Christ-followers who show us the importance of coming together to ponder, celebrate, and work out the implications of a journey that they could now begin to see had begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus and included more than themselves.

B. It's not for nothing that as the NT writers describe what life looks like as a follower of Jesus that the phrase “one another” is frequently used. It appears almost two dozen times, ranging from your basic “love one another,” and “encourage one another,” to “carry one another's burdens,” “accept one another,” “do not envy one another,” and “confess your sins to one another.” (There's a full list on the table downstairs.) I can't help but wonder whether these writers had some OT wisdom in mind:

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another (Prov. 27:17)

Two are better than one . . . if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up (Ecc. 4:9-12)

All sorts of wisdom is contained in these verses, all aimed at how we need one another. As we gather in fellowship with one another Jesus brings his presence, his peace, and his perspective. We still have grief and loss to share, but even more, we have the presence and activity of the Jesus, a presence and activity we can share with others for the encouragement and growth of all.

III. Journey Outward – Connecting with Our Community

A. But that still wasn't all. For, into this assembled fellowship, Jesus came. Yes, his coming was to solidify their personal stories. Yes, it was to affirm the importance of their coming away from the world to be together for mutual support and growth. But it was also then to commission them, to send them back out into the world to bear witness in their communities to what they had seen and heard, to tell what has happened to us on the road. “You are witnesses of these things,” he tells them (v. 48). As our journey inward, and together, brings us meaning and joy, it is not complete until it brings the same to those who don't yet know him.

B. It also shows us that evangelism need not be scary, nor does it require a pamphlet or special training. All it requires is sharing what has happened to us on the road, how Jesus has met us there and has made a difference in our lives. It's inviting others into the fellowship of burning hearts, into the space where Jesus begins to make sense of life. "The best evangelists," Ruth Haley observes, "are people just like the Emmaus Road disciples who can't wait to tell others what happened to them on the road and how Jesus met them." The Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well comes to mind here, as she couldn't wait to tell her neighbors about "the man who told me everything I ever did" (Jn. 4:29). [Come see a man who knows all about me and still loves me!] We might amend slightly the saying, "Evangelism is simply one beggar telling another where to find bread," to, "evangelism is simply one beggar telling another where to find the bread that has been broken for them."

C. In all of this, Henri Nouwen sounds an important note as he observes that chronology is important here. That is, the journey inward must precede the journey outward, or else we won't have much to share. We must be deeply grounded in the unconditional love – the hospitality – of Christ for us so that we can see, and extend such, to others. We might say that the transformation planted in us through personal encounters with Jesus is grown in fellowship with others who know him, and harvested in love for others who don't yet know.

D. One final word is spoken by Jesus at the end: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (v. 49). The promise of Jesus is that he won't leave us alone but will stay alongside us and enable us to do what he's called us to do. This, of course, anticipates Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence. And it may be why Jesus seems to keep disappearing at each of his post-resurrection appearances. Jesus wanted his followers to know he was alive, but he also wanted them to learn to relate to him in a new way. He would no longer be their physical earthly friend and teacher, but would be present with them in a spiritual way, mediated through the Holy Spirit. He was teaching them to learn to live by faith, not by sight.

So, as we move in our spiritual journey from inward to together to outward, to personal to corporate to missional encounters, may we know that "Jesus is alive" and continuing to walk with us.