

**April 11, 2021**

*The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter*

Acts 2:32-35

Luke 24:13-35

### ***Going Out and Coming Back***

***Rev. Dr. Richard E. Spalding***

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.

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No one remembers now exactly where the village known as Emmaus was located in New Testament times. Today there are four or five places that can stake some kind of a claim to be the place where those two frightened and dispirited people were headed when the risen Christ caught up with them on the road leading away from Jerusalem. The place that probably has the best claim is called *Motsa*, a Palestinian village about three and a half miles down the steep rock escarpment to the west of Jerusalem. The Hebrew name *Motsa* may be derived from a verb which means *to go out* – perhaps because it would have been the village to which you came first if you were going out from Jerusalem. And, of course, in Hebrew all *going out* recalls the exodus from Egypt, the fundamental going-out that launched all our experience of the liberation of faith.

Going out, in any case, has been the fate of the village of *Motsa*. In 1948 the Palestinians who were living there were made permanent refugees when *Motsa* effectively evaporated into the newly created state of Israel. So perhaps part of the meaning we should hear in the name Emmaus is the echoing cry of a people to be remembered – a people who have been struggling for generations to keep from going out.

But if we hold on together to the story of what happened on the way to that place, even if we were to lose everything else – the way those travelers must have felt they'd lost everything else – the way the map has lost the village of *Motsa* – what we'll be holding on to in this one story is almost enough by itself. The Emmaus story inscribes for us the pattern of God's stubborn reversals; the blueprint of the sacred meal; the confirmation that the living seed of the good news, having fallen into the ground, is now beginning to bear its fruit at last. In Greek, a noun isn't enough of a word to contain the idea of "good news": in Greek, "good news" has to also be a verb, because it's more than just an idea that sits in our minds, it's a truth that only comes fully into being in the act of telling it. So Emmaus is preeminently about good-news-ing: about going out and coming back from the town called "going-out" to keep the flame of that news from going out altogether.

"Two of them were going out," the story says. We learn later that one of them was named Cleopas, although we never meet him again in the pages of scripture; perhaps the other was his wife, who may have gotten a mention just once in the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps we aren't really meant to know who either of them are, aren't meant to be able to distinguish them from ourselves. It's been a couple of days since the latest public execution in the city, as the two of them follow the steep road that winds down from the height of Jerusalem. Their conversation is consumed by the vivid horror of what those events burned onto the retina of memory. So maybe it's not surprising that at first they scarcely notice a stranger who has caught up with them, walking in the same direction. When their companion asks about the reason for their sadness and distraction, it brings them to a standstill for a moment on the road – and then Cleopas responds, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" And then Jesus – forever a stranger and, perhaps, a permanent refugee himself on this earth – Jesus says one of the kindest things we ever hear on his lips. "What things?" he says. In Greek, it's a single word: "*poia?*" *What things have happened to you?*

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<sup>1</sup> In John 19:25, the list of eye-witnesses to the crucifixion includes "[Jesus's] mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Since the original Greek text does not supply punctuation, we can't even be sure whether this is a list of 3 women or 4 (the syntax doesn't make clear whether the second person in the list is named Mary – and whether she is married to Clopas) – let alone whether the "Clopas" in John, though with a differently-spelled name, is the same person who walked to Emmaus in Luke. Though it's enormously tempting to elide them, scholars tend to be suspicious of the easier reading that would result from such a move.

Now, of course, if there were *anyone* who'd know what'd been happening in Jerusalem it'd be Jesus, who had watched all the anguish and fear and guilt play out from the high vantage point of his own agony, and scoured the minutes along with everyone else for some sign of whatever it was that God might intend in all that. But still, *What things?* Jesus asked them; with a single word he invited them to unburden themselves of the story they were going out with, lugging down the road, and so in that single word he launched the pastoral vocation. I think it is not overstating things to say that the essential work of ministry was born again in that question – or, perhaps, raised from the death it must have suffered when it seemed that the Powers had succeeded in humiliating everything he stood for and shattering his community forever. It's the story that finally has to be told if they are ever to arrive at someplace, they can be fed again. "What things have happened to you?" Jesus wanted to know, to get the travelers talking. Tell me the story of what you've been through. His kindness gave dignity to their experience.

And it worked; by the time this episode is complete Cleopas and his companion have said four times as many words as Jesus. They have gone out, and now they have begun telling the story; and, when you think about it, those two things by themselves are enough to explain our being here. *Poia?* is the hinge word between his work and their work and our work.

We in this church know something about walking a long road to an uncertain destination carrying the remembrance of painful, costly things that happened – the remembrance of anger and fear and worry. In the earlier stages of this journey, going out was what mattered most: it was how we could put things behind us and find our way to a place to take a few deep breaths and gain some perspective. The community that had been our spiritual home seemed to have so much potential, seemed to be ready to accomplish nothing less than making God's love visible. But then things happened that made it all seem so much more vulnerable than anyone realized it could be; things happened that seemed to have the power to pull us apart, things that weighed on our hearts and knocked us back on our heels and slowed us down. We had work to do, and it began with the invitation to name the things that had happened. We had to wonder out loud why we were here. We had to step back and understand that the home we take for granted is a fragile little planet crying out to be a kind of new creation. We had to face the exhausting, inescapable truth that the work of justice is unfinished, and that it implicates every one of us - and we had to be humbled by the power of a tiny microbe to upend our lives and test our resolve to care for one another as a society and as a world. We had to re-tell ourselves the long story of our ancestors' escape from bondage, their yearning for the place of promise and all the things they had to learn while they were getting there. We had to be willing to risk dreaming that God could really fulfill our hopes. All these things happened – and as we named them, looked at them, felt them land among us – something else happened. We realized we were not alone or bereft on the road. We had been caught up to by the intimation that God could actually use all of these things that happened to open our hearts, to widen our imaginations, to whet our energies, to stir our longings for each other, to strengthen us for the work still to be done.

Going out – walking out the grief, walking out the questions, walking on – we began to recognize the Godliness of that gentle but urgent presence of the question that met us on the road and

opened us: *poia? What things have happened?* Along the way, as we've thought about them, they've started getting woven into the big story of how love is stronger than death, how justice must triumph over tyranny, how getting free entails discovering responsibility, how we belong to each other. So, when our journey finally brings us to the place of hospitality, the stories of the things that have happened become sacred things: the stories of the hard times we've lived through, the pain we have known... the stories of the suffering we've opened our eyes to see around us and tried to alleviate... the stories of the loves we have loved ... the stories of the hope that will not let go of us. We'll set the table with those stories – the Table where, before too much longer, we'll all meet again at the same time, together. The Table around which we pool what we've got, and find that it is enough for everyone and anyone.

Maybe, when we meet at the table at the end of the journey of going out and coming back, we'll catch one another's eyes over the loaf as it is lifted, and maybe there'll be a moment of recognition that now the going-out is ours to do – now the story is ours to tell. All this was real – all this, fashioned now into a verb for good- news-ing. All this happened. These things.

The light of day was far spent when Cleopas and his friend found lodging in Emmaus, spread their table, put aside their fear and exhaustion long enough to hand the stranger their loaf to bless. But then, when the bread was broken, and the third seat empty – when Jesus had shown them how irrepressible his life is, and they no longer needed to see his body in order to see God beside them in their story – when they realized that their hearts had been burning within them, blazing but not consumed like the bush in the wilderness of the exodus with which the first going-out began... when all of that had happened, and when the sun had finally set on an old day, “at *that same hour* they got up and returned to Jerusalem...” Darkness must have been well advanced by then, and the time well beyond a safe hour to walk however many miles it was back up the hill to Jerusalem. But by story and by bread they knew that their going-out from Emmaus meant, not escape to safety and forgetfulness, but a return to the community that held what it had in common, together – and a return to the throbbing heart of the city. Their journey back to Jerusalem from Emmaus that night was the first recorded act of post-Resurrection courage.

In their memory and in their company, and in the presence of the One who has gently but insistently taught us to ask the question that will begin to help him mend this world – *what things?* – now, we too will take to the going-back road – another post-Resurrection act of courage. Along the way, we'll walk and speak of the things that have happened, as a way of understanding what they mean, what they ask of us, what they make possible if we have this mind among us. Nothing will ever take from us the meaning we found in the things that happened: the pattern of God's stubborn reversals; the blueprint of the sacred meal; the confirmation that the living seed of the good news, having fallen into the ground, is now beginning to bear its fruit at last. And the long journey of going-out and coming-back will give it all the shape of good news – so that when we get back to the place we left with the taste of wine still on our lips and the burn of the story still very near our heart – we'll be ready to tell what we hold together, what we know together, over and over again, as our way of keeping the truth about love and justice and hope from ever going out.