

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Community of Patience**

Luke 24:13-35

As you step into today's text from Luke, don't be in a hurry. In fact, it probably wouldn't hurt if a sign were posted that says, "Walk, don't run, through this passage of Scripture." True, later on, when they're on their way from Emmaus back to Jerusalem, Cleopas and his traveling buddy will pick up the pace. But here at the beginning of today's story, the two of them aren't pushing it. Partly because they're weary, not just physically but emotionally as well. They had pinned their hopes on Jesus, believing he was the one who would liberate Israel and restore its glory. But now that dream is all over. Jesus is dead and gone. Nothing has changed. The powers that be have won again. So now, all the two of them can do is make the seven-mile journey of despair back to their home.

As they walk, they take their time. At least they have each other, and plenty of material for conversation during the journey. The primary subject is the life, and most of all the death, of Jesus. But soon, the Jesus whom they believe is dead and buried, shows up, very much alive and on his feet. He joins them in their walk, and their conversation. "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" asks Jesus. Our English translations can make it sound like Cleopas and his fellow disciple were having a polite, detached theological discussion about current events. But Luke's choice of words depicts something more intense. The two of them were actually having a pretty heated exchange. And why not, considering what was on the line. Remember that they had staked their future on the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Now it looked like their faith was futile. As Luke puts it, "They stood still, their faces downcast" (v. 17b).

Wouldn't now be a great time for Jesus to unveil himself to them, so they could see that their faith hadn't been futile after all? Jesus could go ahead and disclose his identity, and they could see that his resurrection was for real, and not just some false report. But Jesus doesn't opt for a quick fix. He doesn't just swoop in, take away their sadness, give them joy, and then zoom back to heaven. Instead, Jesus continues the conversation. He engages them in further dialogue about what has happened, and especially what all these things have to do with their knowledge of the Bible.

"How foolish you are," says Jesus, "and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" At this point, Jesus could have throw up his arms and said, "That's it! I give up. You all are never going to get it, no matter how much witnessing you hear from Moses and the prophets." But instead of throwing in the towel and letting them go on their not so merry way, Jesus hangs in there with them and patiently unfolds the way that the Scriptures point to him.

Just when it looks like his crash course on the Scriptures may be the soul-winning finale of the story, Jesus takes things a step further. He continues this encounter past sunset by accepting an offer of hospitality from Cleopas and the other disciple. The two of them welcome a stranger to their table, a stranger who ends up being the host instead of the

guest. Jesus breaks the bread, blesses God, and shares with those at the table. It's in this act that the disciples recognize this stranger as Christ himself.

The way that Luke patiently and carefully unfolds this story, especially the parts about the opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread, shows us that he is doing more than just telling us a story about Jesus. He's also telling us a story about ourselves, the church. Luke is skillfully describing what life is like in a community of people like ours where we gather, open the Scriptures, and find that our own hearts "burn within us," and that we recognize Jesus as he breaks the bread and shares it with us. In other words, we're a fellowship of believers where Jesus comes to us, meets with us, and shows us more of who he is and what he wants us to do.

That takes time and patience. Jesus' patience with us, and our patience with one another. Note, as I said earlier, that today's Scripture passage is not a text for those who are in a hurry. There are several things in this story that require slowing down. Things like walking, and talking. In this case, several miles of walking and talking. Or things like carefully searching the Scriptures, in order to hear how God is talking to us. Or things like sitting down at the table for a meal and conversation. Think about how these kinds of experiences and practices have become less and less common in our lives.

The speed at which we live our lives, even though it can make us feel more efficient and productive, can also work against our need for deeper communion with Christ. In order to cultivate a relationship with the Lord, and grow in your fellowship with him and his people, you often need to decelerate and be more attentive to Christ's presence in the moment. One person tells about the time that his mother was driving him and his sisters to school and got pulled over for speeding. After things were worked out with the officer, they drove off, with the mother being careful to stay under the speed limit. In a few minutes, they heard a strange sound coming from the vehicle. "What's that noise?" asked the mother. To which he laughingly replied, "That's the sound of slow. We've never heard it before."<sup>1</sup>

The story of the journey to Emmaus has a lot of the sound of slow in it. The sound of footsteps on a long walk. The sound of conversation and dialogue. The sound of reading and reflection. The sound of folks pulling their chairs up to the table. The sound of food being passed to one another. The sound of fellowship in Christ. The sound of fellowship with Christ. These are the kinds of sounds that go along with a community of people like us who are cultivating together the resurrection life of Christ in our relationships with each other.

A local church is more than just an organization or an institution. It's a web of relationships. Relationships that don't come ready-made, like a dinner item that you simply pop in the microwave and enjoy. No, relationships take time. You can't rush them. You have to tend them and cultivate them. You have to work at them and invest in them. You have to appreciate them, monitor them, and give yourself to them. All of this means that being the church is often a slow kind of thing, because relationships are a slow kind of thing.

One of the ways we come alongside one another and walk with one another in this journey of discipleship is by our conversations with one another. Some of those take place here on Sundays. After our first hymn, you're encouraged to turn and greet those around you, which, in the case of our congregation, usually turns into more than just a quick hello. Conversations break out in the aisles and between the pews. It normally takes a couple of attempts from myself or Willis to settle everyone down and proceed to the children's sermon. Couple that with the extended conversations that take place as you linger in the

sanctuary or the church lobby after worship. These are signs of how much the aliveness of a congregation depends upon face-to-face, verbal interaction with one another.

Another one of the gifts of Sunday worship is the opportunity I have to be here at the pulpit, where we can engage one another face-to-face during the preaching of God's Word. I can see you and you can see me. I can speak to you, interact with you, be with you, and form relationship with you. But my relationship with you extends beyond the sermon. I like the way that Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it when he said that preaching is like throwing a bucket of water at a row of bottles. Some of the water goes in some of the bottles. But as Spurgeon pointed out, I have the opportunity to top off every bottle and make sure none of the water spills by talking to you personally and engaging with you individually in other ways, whether on Sunday or during the other days of the week. Our bond as pastor and people is something that gets formed over time, in all the ways that we give ourselves to each other. This flesh and blood interaction with one another is where Christ is present and working.

Professor Sherry Turkle wrote a book titled *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. She claims that our "plugged-in lives" have changed us. Our technological devices have created a world where we're constantly communicating but seldom having real conversations. She says:

We are tempted to think that our little "sips" of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation. But they don't. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, all of these have their places . . . . But no matter how valuable, they do not substitute for conversation. Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying, "I am thinking about you" . . . . But connecting in sips doesn't work as well when it comes to understanding and knowing one another.<sup>2</sup>

Where would Luke's story of the journey to Emmaus be without conversation? Miles worth of conversation. Conversation on the road. Conversation in the house. Conversation at the table. When it came time to break the bread, Jesus didn't show up via video chat and say, "Cleopas and friends, put on your 3D virtual reality headsets, so that when I stick this piece of bread out, it looks like it's coming straight at you." No, Jesus had more directly walked with them, talked with them, and was eating with them. It was through Jesus' patient, persevering, and purposeful encounter with them that their eyes were opened and they were changed.

Christ's work of revealing himself to us and making us messengers of the gospel is a slow and patient work. But our risen Lord knows how to keep at it, especially when our faith weakens or we wonder if our hope in him is misplaced. One of the primary ways Christ keeps at it is by giving us this congregation, this community of patience. A community where Christ is with us as we open the Scriptures, as we break the bread, as we walk with one another, as we talk to one another, as we listen to one another, as we eat together, as we sing together, as we serve together, as we give together, as we exhort one another, as we encourage one another, as we slowly and deliberately spend time in communion with each other.

As we do so, Christ's presence may not be crystal clear to us at the moment, perhaps because the experiences seem so normal and routine, but in hindsight we're able to recognize and realize that the Lord is indeed risen, and has been walking with us, speaking to us, and breaking the bread with us.

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Tunrbaugh, Garner, N.C. *Christian Reader*, "Lite Fare."

<sup>2</sup> Sherry Turkle, "The Flight from Conversation," *The New York Times Sunday Review* (April 21, 2012).