

Today I want to focus on the first half of the story: The Road to Emmaus. Next week we can explore the second half of the passage.

I love two things about this passage: the healing process Jesus illustrates and the importance of sharing table fellowship. Listen!

Luke 24:13-35

<sup>13</sup>Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup>and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup>While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup>but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup>And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup>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?” <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.” <sup>25</sup>Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” <sup>27</sup>Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup>As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup>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?” <sup>33</sup>That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup>They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup>Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Two songs come to mind when I hear this passage. The first has the title in the line, “What’s become of the broken-hearted who had love that’s now departed.” The second, a friend said might be the saddest song he knew, “Since I fell for you, you made me leave my happy home, took my love, and now you’re gone.”

Those two songs capture the mood of Cleopas and his friend, maybe his wife, as they despondently trudge home. Each step is an effort as their loss weighs heavy on them. They are disappointed and discouraged, for Jesus was the one they followed. They trusted him and bet their life on him, and the Romans crucified him.

He comes up and begins to walk with them. They don't recognize him as he begins to walk alongside them. We are not told why.

"What's up," he asks. Incredulously, they reply, "Don't you know?" Maybe with a bit of snark, they tell him about Jesus, and now he's gone for good, silenced, executed. And here comes the heart of their grief, the clencher. "We had hoped that he was the one." Their hopes and dreams were shattered.

We, too, have visited the land of shattered dreams and suffered loss and grief. At the time, it feels like it will never end.

To make it worse, they continue, "Some women said they had seen his tomb, and it was now empty. But we know he is dead. He is dead!"

One commentator on the passage suggests Jesus' reply is not as harsh as it sounds. "You foolish ones might better be read, my dear foolish ones," said with affection.

Then, he begins to explain that what had happened was part of God's plan, not some accident. It was the path the Messiah had to follow, and part of that path was the resurrection.

As they continued, Jesus was going to walk on when the pair arrived at their destination, or so it seemed. But they insisted he stay with them and enjoy a meal and spend the night. They were still awash with grief, but had not forgotten how important it was to show hospitality to a stranger.

So, they hosted him at dinner, and Jesus turned the tables and became the host. He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Sure, The Lord's Supper is referenced here. As they ate, they could see it was Jesus. Dining with Jesus helped them recognize the one they had dined with so many times and remember many times he had said the blessing over the bread. And then they understood why he spent so much time talking about the scriptures as he did. This was to help them see him in the breaking of bread. And then he's gone again, but they don't grieve. Instead, they rush to tell the other disciples what they had experienced. It turns out, when they get back, they find out Jesus had appeared to Peter. No doubt about it, he has risen.

This is one of the most beloved stories in Scripture. I love it because it deals honestly with grief. A journey we have taken with these two disciples. And it focuses on our eating together.

Jesus encounters two of his grieving disciples and, for a while, just walks alongside them in silence. This is so vital in Jesus' day and in ours in times of pain. When people grieve, hurt, and are broken-hearted, our job is to show up, not fix them or shower them with meaningless platitudes. The one thing we must not do is avoid them.

People often don't show up in times of grief, even when the folks are dear friends, because they feel they don't know how to respond. It doesn't matter that we don't know what to say. We are to show up. A simple, "I am so sorry for your loss," is enough in most cases.

We can always show our compassion by showing up and just being present. That's what Jesus does. And beyond a simple, open-ended question, Jesus listens to hear what's on their minds and hearts. This is a great model for our response to people suffering from grief and heartache. But, first, we show up and, with our presence, say we care.

And after showing, he prompts them to say what's on their heart, letting them take the lead. And he listens to them. He doesn't try to fix them. Instead, he lets them speak, vent, and grieve until they are done. Then, when they are done, he begins to speak. Only then does he respond in love, "My dear foolish ones." This had to happen; it was the Messiah's destiny, including being raised.

This act of love allowed Jesus to speak to them when they were ready to hear him. He allowed them to guide the conversation and then he sensed, in their reference to the empty tomb, that they were prepared to hear more. He talked to them about the Messiah and that the Messiah would be raised in glory.

We would be well-served to learn from Jesus' response to grief and heartache: show up, listen, and respond when the hurting one shows they are ready to hear more.

One great warning: in the story, grief and sorrow are short-lived, over in a day. In our lives, it is not so. There is no quick fix for sorrow and grief. They dwell for a longer time and, in some sense, forever. But the same things Jesus does, we can do as well. The same process applies. It is no checklist. I have done this; now I do this. And it is not all about us and our experience. It is a sensitive process focused on the needs of the hurting one. We come with a loving presence, the ability to listen, and the desire to let the hurting one guide the conversation. It's no quick fix; it takes time, as we know from our own experiences, but it can make all the difference.

This is not something we do only for others. When we open ourselves to the healing touch that Jesus brings, through his presence and the presence of others, healing takes place. Jesus can come to us in our pain and equip us to serve others. Come Lord Jesus, be our guest.

That's the first thing I love about the story, and the second thing is the importance of table fellowship.

These loving actions by Jesus open the disciples to take the next step and treat this stranger as a guest and bid him stay and eat with them. This is Jesus' strong suit. Jesus is at home dining with others. In the sharing of a meal, he is also loving and teaching people as he dines with them. As I like to say, you can read the gospel as a story about Jesus on his way to dinner, at dinner, or leaving a dinner. Jesus knew that eating with people was vital. It is a sign of affirmation and acceptance and an act of healing. Who one will or won't dine with said a lot about people in Jesus' day, which is true today.

In our Zooming and isolation, we have lost the joy of personal contact. We stopped sharing the human touch of dining together.

I love that our church provides a lot of opportunities for table fellowship. It is one of our greatest strengths: fellowship.

I enjoy the many opportunities we have to be at the table together and rejoice that our dinners out each month are restarting. There is also sharing of a carry-in meal before our Thursday night activities and I look forward to the fall when we might enjoy our monthly fellowship dinners. I enjoy coffee and conversation each Friday and Tea with Bruce and Phil on the third Tuesday.

Personally, I appreciate my weekly gathering with area pastors, which had almost been defeated by COVID. And most recently, I appreciate the hospitality of the Islamic Center inviting me to their evening service held at the breaking of the fast of Ramadan. As one young man there said, "Food brings people together."

Significantly, Cleopas and his companion recognize Jesus as they share a meal. The meal completes their healing. We can get all theological about Communion and how it divides the church and who is welcome and who is not. But, for me, Communion is a meal shared with Jesus. It echoes the old grace, "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest; let this food by you be blest."

As we share opportunities to break bread together, let us always remember, Jesus is there, bringing his loving, healing touch.

Amen.