

Is There An Emmaus Road In Our Town?

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Wouldn't you love to have been the men
who met the Risen Christ
on the road to Emmaus?
To have been so encountered
in the midst of your daily life
with the presence of the Risen Christ
that you and those who heard your story
could never again doubt
the truth of the Ressurrection?

Is there an Emmaus Road in our town?
I peel grapefruit and wonder:
Where does one go?
What does one do
to meet the Risen Christ
in the late 1970's?
Is there really an Emmaus Road here?

I glance out the window
to check on our two-year-old Kirk
and his friend Lindsay.
She's potty-trained and he's street-trained
but together they sometimes
venture to the edge of the street.

Sure enough there they sit:
tricycle overturned two feet out
from the curb,
they sit in the gutter —
no doubt pleased to have
an excuse to get that far!

I march out wearing my best "mean mama"
look, pick them up,
and swat them both soundly
on the bottom,
explaining simply and sternly
the dangers of going into the street.
Their lips quiver, then poke out,

their feelings seem hurt
more than their seats;
but the looks on their faces
say they are undoubtedly
suffering the wages of sin:
the worst form of death to a two-year-old —
estrangement from mother.

I walk away
to pick up the toys strewn
in the neighbor's yard,
physically reinforcing
the distance between us,
sending instructions on the wind
for them to ride their trikes
nearer the house.
They move slowly away from the street
obviously miserable.

I step up to the second step
about to go back to my supper preparation
and leave them in their repentance.
Then I am reminded
how desperately one who is rebuked
wants the relationship restored —
at any age
but especially at two.

I walk back and meet them in the driveway,
giving no hint of my changed mood
till I kneel in front of them
saying:

“You know something?
I love Lindsay
and I love Kirk.”

What a look!
Her blue eyes were flooded
with love, gratitude,
instant reception of that love.
His sturdy body
hurled itself into my arms
clinging tightly as he soaked up
the love and acceptance
he had so deeply missed
the past three minutes.
“I don't want you
to get hurt in the street
because I love you.”

I reinforced the rules,
but all they heard
was the love restored.

How can I explain it?
The road to Emmaus in my driveway?
Absurd?
But, yes, He was there —
in her blue eyes
the Reconciling Christ
who came to bring release to the captives,
to set the prisoners free.

Where?
In her eyes, in my heart,
in the sturdy arms clenching my neck,
He was among us.

How?
I do not know, but
I could not doubt His presence.

I finished reading the above "Experience of Faith," paused and said to the congregation: "Let us stand and affirm together our faith in the Risen Christ." After worship, men and women pressed forward, but it was the women of all ages who, with tears in their eyes, said again and again: "Yes, we've been there, too. Thank you for lifting up our experience. We, too, have met the Risen Christ in our driveways, over a neighborly cup of coffee, in the eyes of our children." And for me, it no longer seemed absurd to have walked the Emmaus Road in my own driveway.

Is this not the nucleus of the Easter faith? The Lord of Easter is known only as He makes Himself known to women and men where they are. In contrast to the apocalyptic day of the Lord, Luke's day of the Lord is squarely in the midst of history. He comes to us in the midst of daily life. Where does one go? No-where. He comes to us where we are.

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He came again this morning,
as before, unexpected.
His visit recognized
and remembered afterwards
with awe and thanksgiving
that I had been privileged
to be present.

My friend, whom I'll call Dena, had told me the week before this encounter: "Ever since we set our appointment I have savored this moment like a fresh dewdrop." This week I phoned Dena to change the time of our visit. She agreed then offered to just call it off. Knowing her need of friendship, I said, "No, if you can't stay an hour, then come for thirty minutes." She was here before I

could get dressed. A visit that had almost been called off became the occasion for her pouring out her heart: the verbal abuse she endures, the withdrawal with which she responds, and her fear of another trip to an "insane assylum." "I just let him rage on. If I say anything it makes it worse. I've decided silence is best. But when I'm silent for a week or so, he goes crying those big crocodile tears for the judge, and I end up in the state hospital."

Many times Dena had talked of past illnesses, never before revealing the irritating drip in her daily life that eats away her rock-like character.

I responded —
one woman encouraging another
to resist verbal abuse —
one person believing in another,
caring, wanting the other
to live.

She left resolving
not to withdraw again.

A decision to live . . .
"and he sets the oppressed free"
She left resolved
to hold fast to the freedom
she's bloomed in the past four years,
resolved not to fall back
into the bonds of slavery.

He was among us —
uninvited
(there wasn't time to pray).
She was here.
I responded.
But He came.
Unexpected,
unrecognized
until it
happened —
an oppressed woman
left my embrace
holding fast to freedom.
I could not doubt
His presence.

April 23, 1978 ——— Riding across East Texas on a bus I encountered Edna. I first noticed her befriending a young black man falsely accused of stealing a suitcase. In Tyler another young man boarded the bus, a person with some obvious abnormality. He sat behind me and tried to strike up a conversation. I responded politely but briefly. Periodic attempts to relate with me and the other women around continued for the next hundred miles. No one encouraged him.

I felt some guilt, believing he needed relationship more than the average person. I did not want to add to his pile of rejection slips, but I really did not want to talk with anyone.

Edna also responded politely but briefly. Finally as we passed the Louisiana border, she responded more kindly to his random attempts at conversation. She lived in California and was returning to visit family in Shreveport. He, in turn, said he was returning to school in Shreveport and added with pride that he went to Evergreen Presbyterian Vocational School near Minden. He now lived at Evergreen House in Shreveport. She knew exactly where it was. She had worked for the Episcopal priest across the street. The young man was delighted. He worshipped at the same Episcopal church and knew the priest well.

On the seat ahead I sank lower, my guilt compounded. Evergreen is a service agency of my own denomination. It had been born and nurtured by my own home church and generously supported by my own family.

Who was the Christ figure? The mentally handicapped young man despised and rejected by his travelling companions (including me)? Edna, the nurturing black woman from California? Both? Neither? My eyes were opened: the Christ was among us — in the defense of the accused . . . in the affirming of the alienated . . . His presence evident in action.

Our God is a verbal God — not because He talks, but because He acts. Verbs are words of action or being. God's being is action with and for persons. Therefore, for us, made in His image, to be sinless is not to be better than others, but to be with and for others.

Action with and for people, is this not what all the archetypes of His promised presence have in common? "Fear not," He says repeatedly, "for I am *with you* always." Especially he promised in archetypes such as reconciliation, release of the captives (Luke 4), feeding of the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked (Matthew 25), hope for those in despair, sharing the common meal (Luke 24), healing the sick, and advocacy — boldness on behalf of those in need (Acts 4:5-20).

Being with and for persons. What's new about that? An awareness of the presence of the Lord with and for people in everyday life is certainly prior to the Resurrection. The Psalmists affirmed One who was a "very present help in trouble" and asked "Whither shall I go from His presence?" The God of Abraham and Moses has always delivered His people. Amos' cry for justice in the gate was eight hundred years before Jesus read Isaiah in the synagogue. The continuous availability summed up in Christ's promise "I will be with you always," is not that new to the people of God.

What then distinguishes the presence of the Risen Christ from the Eternal presence of the Creator, Sustainer God? Is the power of the Risen Christ really different from the power of the Spirit which sustained Jesus in the wilderness and has been experienced in all post-resurrection communities of the faithful?

The question is not raised to pursue trinitarian gymnastics. We who are firmly rooted in the unity of a triune God need not waste much time worrying about who is doing what when. John's affirmation rings in the ears: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . all things were made through him . . ."

The question is raised to help us recognize him. Reading “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” with Luke 4 and Matthew 25 echoing in the background was an “aha” moment. In saying all acts of ministry to persons in need are acts of ministry to Him (Matthew 25), Christ takes on their flesh. He is both the one who proclaims good news to the poor (Luke 4) and the one to whom it is proclaimed (Matthew 25). He is both the one who proclaims release to the captives and the captive himself.

I see the unique function of the Risen Christ — the redeeming activity of God — in those occasions when (1) our eyes are opened to the Lord’s identification with the need of persons and (2) we are able to respond to that need. There is both the ability to see people as God sees them and the power from beyond ourselves to respond to their need.

The Risen Christ acts on both sides of any chasm in human relationships. I experienced this two-fold action of the Risen Christ in overcoming a chasm which often looms between husband and wife.

The old agony overwhelms me.

Must I always fly alone?

Is soaring only solo?

Will you never dive
into the ocean depths
with me?

Must we always wade
in the shallows?

Would that we could
plunge together
into the deepness
of each other’s needs!
Would that we could
soar together
into the far reaches
of each other’s hopes and dreams!

Must I always fly alone?

I do so miss you
on those lonely flights?

When others seem too far away, the temptation is to justify the distance with one’s concept of God. To hear Him answer our plaintive: “Must I always fly alone?” with an inviting: “No! I am higher than you’ve ever soared. Fear not, I am with you. Fly on! I am ahead of you.” There is some truth and solace in this. However, the Risen Christ first answers with a qualifying “but”:

But fly with the other—

for I am with him, too.

Fly not away from him to Me,
to reject him
is to turn away from Me.

Dive in, my child,
but dare to plunge
into the deepness
of his needs!
Fly, my child,
but dare to soar
into the far reaches
of his hopes and dreams!

And then He adds an empowering, liberating “and”:

And, my child, dare to share
the deepness of your needs.
Risk revealing the far reaches
of your hopes and dreams.

Fly together . . .
for wherever two or three
fly together in My name
there am I
in the midst of them.

If the empowering, liberating “and,” is left off, I could spend a life-time imprisoned in resentful martyrdom, never allowing myself to be heard or my own needs met. In drawing us together, the Lord of Easter redeems us both.

To see the needs of people in the late 1970's is no great feat. When the chasms are magnified into national and international proportions, the problem becomes not one of seeing the need as much as a lack of hopefulness that the needs can be met.

The experience of the Risen Christ keeps us looking for alternatives to the overwhelming needs of world hunger, prison reform, child abuse, human rights The Lord of Easter assures us the power is available.

We work in a double infinity:
immeasurable need
and
immeasurable power.
Our task: to be so open
to the Risen Christ
that the infinities meet.

Is there an Emmaus Road in our town? Yes! In the midst of our daily lives He comes. Where do we go? Nowhere. He comes to us where we are. Whenever our eyes are opened to the Lord's identification with the need of persons and we are able to respond to that need — in that time and in that place — we walk the King's Highway!