

The E Prayer

Luke 24:13-35

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There is something elusive about Easter. Even staid Southern Presbyterians now observe Lent and take a slow prayerful walk through Holy Week. Churches of every tradition pull out all the stops for Easter day; it's after Easter that stumps us. After Easter the throng fades much like the crowds faded soon after a rush of religious renewal following 9/11. We're left with our new Easter clothes and nowhere to go. There is something terribly elusive about Easter.

If you don't trust me on this, read the Bible. Flip to the ending of any of the four Gospels. You'll read about the final week of Jesus' life – his last supper, his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, his trial before the Sanhedrin and then Pilate, his torture, the horrific march to Golgotha, the mocking and derision at the foot of the cross until his final breath, and his burial in a borrowed tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. Flip to the ending of any of the four Gospels and you'll read quite a bit about the last week of Jesus' life. Then read the Easter stories by these same four writers. The details are sparse and the stories are few. And, it's not because Easter is unimportant to any one of them; it is because Easter is just that elusive.

Luke's Emmaus story is a case in point. Emmaus was a hole in the wall some seven miles outside Jerusalem, but in this Easter story, Luke is more interested in what Emmaus *is* than in how you chart it on MapQuest. Fred Buechner says Emmaus is

the place that we go to in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, “Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway” . . . Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [people] have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.¹

For Luke, Emmaus is not just the destination of two despairing disciples; it is *what* they are doing. They're getting out of town, doing whatever they can to get Jesus out of their hearts. They're on the way to wherever they can go to forget that what is lovely and sacred dies—to Emmaus, the place for forgetting—just when they are joined by someone who makes them remember.

In this Easter story, Luke tells *us, the readers*, that the unannounced alien on the road is the risen Jesus, but the two despairing disciples don't get the same memo. For them, the newest arrival is just another stranger who's got to be the only person on earth who hasn't heard about the execution outside Jerusalem.

The two despairing disciples pour out their hearts to this utter stranger. They tell

him about their disillusionment, about how much they had hoped Jesus was the one to bring in the promised reign of God. The unrecognized alien listens to their woes and then speaks and is surprisingly curt in his response. He would certainly fail Pastoral Care 101 based on this verbatim. He doesn't comfort them, saying, "I know you must be really hurting now. I can feel your pain." He says nothing nearly so trite. In fact, he's downright rude. He calls them: "Idiots! Fools!" Then he asks them: "Have you never read your Bible?" Then he gives them a lecture on Bible basics. By the time, he's explained the story of Abraham, Moses, David, the Exile, and the people's return to Jerusalem, this trio has reached the disciples' home.

At the house, Jesus bids them farewell, but they say: "No. Stay with us for evening is coming." Actually, by this point, they may well be ready for this biblical know-it-all to move along, but instead, they offer this stranger their hospitality. Given how Jesus has treated them, it's amazing that they do. Perhaps, even in Emmaus, something of his legacy lives.

Upon their invitation, the stranger stays. Do you remember that story in Genesis when Abraham and Sarah in their great old age are visited by two strangers? Little do they know that these aliens are actually a delegation from God. Abraham and Sarah offer them their hospitality, and these angels stay long enough to tell this old couple that the pregnancy test will soon be positive. Years later, in *The Letter to the Hebrews*, this story from Genesis is remembered with the provocative phrase, "entertaining angels unawares."

Once inside the disciples' house, this story begins to sound like something you and I often hear inside this sanctuary. The sage stranger takes bread and *blesses* it and *breaks* it and *gives* it to the two disciples. At that moment, the fog lifts and they know he is no alien; he's the risen Jesus. Then two things happen almost simultaneously. The risen Jesus vanishes from their sight, but he doesn't vanish from their hearts. They experience a serious case of religious heartburn as they revisit all he said to them while walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

That's not all they do. Within the hour, the disciples leave Emmaus. If Buechner is right, perhaps that is why they do. If Emmaus is the place to go when hope has decayed and died, then they can't stay there now that hope has been renewed. It's not just that they want to leave; they *must* leave. You can't stay in Emmaus once you've seen the risen Lord.

I love this story. I love the way Luke tells it. I love its powerful reserve. I love the way it challenges the typical pious Christian comment: "I'm on a sacred journey to find Jesus." Emmaus is all about a God who is in a life-and-death search to find us, and often finds us on the run.

I am not an Episcopalian, either by birth or by choice, but I admire many Anglican and Episcopalian prayers. When I'm on my own retreat to Emmaus, I often turn to the *Book of Common Prayer* for words of insight and inspiration. In Luke's Emmaus story, two disciples invite Jesus to "Stay with us, for it is almost evening and the day is nearly over." The *Book of Common Prayer* captures this ancient act of hospitality in a moving word of prayer: "Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love."

There's a lovely old hymn that we don't sing much today, because it's an evening

hymn. In it, the Emmaus “prayer” is changed from the plural to the singular: “Abide with me, fast falls the eventide . . . help of the helpless, O abide with me.” I would commend that prayer for anyone to say or sing several times a day, but it is not the Emmaus “prayer.” “Stay with *us*” is the petition of the two hospitable disciples. It is finally not just their prayer, but the prayer of the church, a most plural prayer. This prayer is hardly a command invitation, as if you and I had that kind of command over God. It’s a prayer born in hospitality and issued in gratitude, not from a desire to keep God captive *here*, but to celebrate God’s grace out *there*.

Luke tells us that the risen Jesus is on the move in *here* and out *there*. To utter the E prayer, to pray for Jesus to abide with us, is to pray that you and I be changed, that our eyes be opened to God’s risen presence in the most unlikely places, among the most unexpected aliens. If God answers our E prayer, we’ll no longer be able to drive by blighted neighborhoods in our city as if they weren’t our problem and stare at a panhandling stranger as if she were an anonymous intrusive nuisance, for within these places and with these strangers walks the Emmaus alien, the risen Christ. If we are to pray for Jesus to stay with us, the church cannot be a fallout shelter to which we run from a world gone mad, a safe place to hide and sing our joyful campfire songs while God’s children cry out in misery out there. The tomb could not hold Jesus; neither can any church building. He is risen! He is not *only here*! Once we know that, we cannot stay in any Emmaus of our own making.

To offer the E prayer is to quite likely hear Jesus shouting for shalom over the wall being built between Israel and Palestine and see him riding buses and sitting in restaurants where homicide bombers make their way in Jerusalem; see him walking the halls of Congress and Parliament like a madman who knows that peace is possible for those who desire it more than they desire the economic boom of war. To offer the E prayer means that we might well see the risen Jesus holding a calculator and announcing that the largest federal deficit in U.S. history is a deficit of compassion for the working poor, the disabled, the sick, and the aliens who pick our crops and clean our houses and staff our stores. Offer the E prayer and we’ll most likely find the risen Jesus walking the streets of Atlanta with our sisters and brothers struggling to find a place to stay now that “shelter season” is over.

“Stay with us” may sound innocuous enough, a nice, sweet, innocuous church prayer. “Sweet hour of prayer.” “Sweet hour of prayer.” But the E prayer extends long beyond Sunday morning worship and long after intrudes into every part of our lives. Just ask the two disciples walking the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They probably asked themselves: “What bother can this stranger possibly be?” “Sure, stay with us tonight.” “How much can it cost us to give this guy some bread and wine?” How much did it cost them? It cost them their lives. They would never again walk that Emmaus road assuming that they were alone; never walk that familiar path resolved that life is one long extended disappointing replay. They would never again listen to Scripture read or break bread and drink wine without remembering how the risen Christ came alive in their midst. They would never again return to the same Emmaus.

What about you? Are you ready to offer the E prayer? Are you and I ready to welcome the risen Jesus not just into our Sunday sanctuary, but into our daily businesses and bedrooms and classrooms, into our battles and prisons and asylums, into our greatest joys and most convoluted struggles? I wish I could say, “Yes, Lord, I am ready,” but I am too well acquainted with Emmaus to say that, too well acquainted

with seeking refuge and looking for a safe place to put all my disappointment and despair and fear. I don't know if I'm ready.

What two despairing disciples discovered in the comfort of their home was that it's not so much about what we are ready or not ready for, what we see or refuse to see, but that the risen Jesus is ready for us, ready to open our eyes to see his life-giving presence even in our haunts of hiding, even in Emmaus. Luke tells this story to call the church to prayer, the E prayer, which is not only the Emmaus prayer; it's the Easter prayer. It's the prayer for churches and Christians who recognize that, whether we are ready or not, the risen Jesus leads us headfirst into change, into untiring engagement against those powers that market Emmaus as the most desired destination on earth, into a life's work with redeemed vision for a world being transformed by the death-defying, life-giving love of God.

The E prayer is the most powerful prayer that will ever come from the lips of any person or congregation: It is a prayer that will cost you and me our lives. So, I ask you again, "Are you ready to pray?" Please, pray with me: "Lord Jesus, stay with us; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love."

Note

1. *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row. 1966), 85-86.