

Easter in Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

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Cleopas. What a name.

It's not really a name you hear much anymore. It's kind of an old fashioned name, like Hezekiah or Idabelle. But I'm thinking about bringing it back. I'm thinking about changing my name to Cleopas Schumacher. That sounds like a radio preacher's name – Cleopas Schumacher.

Can you imagine being Cleopas – being remembered by history as the guy who had Jesus over for the very first Easter dinner and didn't even know it?

I once knew a guy whose claim to fame was that he'd made a business deal with Cal Ripken, Jr – the great shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. He'd shaken hands with the "Ironman" himself. And he'd tell anyone who'd listen about. He liked to say, "Look at me. I'm 6'2". I'm not small, but when I shook hands with Cal Ripken, my hand just disappeared in his big ol' paws."

That's a pretty strange claim to fame, but ol' Cleopas' claim was even stranger: "I'm the guy who had Jesus over for dinner on the very first Easter. Never mind that I had no idea who he was, but, hey, he ate at my house."

And that is the only reason we know of Cleopas at all. He's never before or never again mentioned in all of the New Testament. He's just the guy who had dinner with Jesus on that first Easter – and didn't even know it until it was all over.

This little story is full of little peculiarities like that. For one, it's told here in Luke and recounted nowhere else. Like Cleopas, there is no further mention of it anywhere else in the New Testament.

The village of Emmaus is also surrounded by mystery. Luke tries to be specific and tells us that it was about 7 miles from Jerusalem, but in which direction we don't know. We do not know for certain where the village of Emmaus is located. Would it surprise if I were to tell you that, like Cleopas and this story as a whole, the village of Emmaus appears nowhere else in the New Testament?

And then there's that second disciple, who is totally unknown to us. But when has a shortage of facts ever kept us from speculating? Some think that it was Simeon, the son of Cleopas. Others have suggested Nathanael or Nicodemus. In Eastern Orthodox iconography, the other disciple is generally identified as Luke the Evangelist himself.

Why any of these is more valid than any of the others, who knows? I, myself, like to think that the second disciple wasn't a man at all, but Cleopas' wife. Of course, I have as much evidence that it was Cleopas' wife as I do that it was Cal Ripken, Jr.

But all these uncertainties aside, this little story lives on in scripture and in the memory of believers, because it feels so real to our own experiences of the risen Christ.

How many times have we entertained Jesus unawares? How many times was it only after the fact that we realized Christ had been present – at that meal, in that situation, in that hospital room?

Afterwards, the couple from Emmaus must have looked at each other and asked themselves, “How much did we embarrass ourselves? What *did* we say? Did we say anything offensive? Why didn’t we notice he was right there?”

On Easter Sunday afternoon, these two dejected, disillusioned disciples were walking home down a dusty road: their chins on their chests, their eyes blank, their faces empty, too stunned still to think clearly.

They wish they could go back to the life they had before they met Jesus, but they know it will never be the same. Maybe things will be simpler now. The disciples never could keep up with Jesus. It crossed their minds that it will be easier to love a memory than to follow Jesus.

They don’t even hear his footsteps. Jesus joins them incognito. Luke says that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (24:16). He asked what they’ve been talking about. They can hardly believe he doesn’t know: “What hole did you just crawl out of? How can you not know what’s been going on?”

They explain to the uninformed stranger that a prophet has been executed. Jesus was gracious in all that he did. He spoke as no one has ever spoke. He lived and loved like no one else. When they were with him they not only *felt* better, they wanted to *be* better.

They tell the stranger that Jesus’ death is the death of their hopes.

But Jesus isn’t dead. He’s standing in the middle of the road looking back at them, wondering how they can be so dense: “You haven’t been paying attention.”

And like a good Baptist preacher, he pulls out his Bible – and starting with the Moses and plowing on through all the prophets, he lays it all out for them. He leads the very first Sunday School class right there in the middle of that dusty road... and they still don’t get it. Jesus himself leads the Bible study, and nothing happens. This story ought to be a source of great comfort for anyone who has ever led Bible study where someone’s eyes glazed over.

When they arrive at the couple’s home, they invite him to stay for supper. Jesus volunteers to say grace and the strangest thing happens: the stranger is suddenly in charge. This house may not belong to Jesus, but the supper does.

He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them — and, suddenly, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They see that Jesus is with them, and then he's gone. They get just a glimpse (Brett Younger, "If God is Here," *The Broadway Pulpit*, April 6, 2008).

It's interesting, isn't it, that the moment of revelation isn't when Jesus taught scripture, but when he broke bread?

In that moment, did his form change back to the Jesus they would recognize? Luke doesn't say so.

Was there a flash of light and he was transfigured before them, like on that mountain top? Luke doesn't say so.

Were the heavens torn open and did a dove descend upon him? Luke doesn't say so.

Did a neon sign with "Jesus" and an arrow pointing down at him appear over him and flash on and off? Luke doesn't say so.

What Luke says is that they realized they were in the presence of the risen Christ when he took a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them.

"Took... blessed... broke... gave..." It is the exact thing he did before he fed the five-thousand (9:16). How many times, I wonder, had the disciples watched Jesus do that simple task? How many times had they watched his hands take bread, bless it, break it, and give it?

It wasn't a flash of light and the heavens weren't torn open. There was no dove descending, no transfiguration, no neon sign — just watching him take, bless, break, and give a loaf of bread.

It wasn't at the Temple in Jerusalem, but at the dinner table... in some no name village... with a couple of disciples who are only remembered because they *did not* know they were eating with Jesus.

Haven't you ever had that experience? Haven't you ever gathered around the table with family and friends, or even strangers, only to realize half way through the meal that Jesus was there, too? The scales fell off your eyes, your heart burned within you, and you suddenly realized that you had been on holy ground?

Haven't you ever had that experience?

I have.

I was probably around twenty-years old the first time I took a group of junior college students to a little village outside of Juarez, Mexico for a medical mission trip. The junior college we were a part of had a nursing program, so each winter we recruited a

couple of local medical doctors, several soon-to-be nurses from the nursing program, and a few unskilled laborers (like myself) to go set up shop in some of the poorest villages and offer a free medical clinic for the day.

I don't even remember the name of the village, but I'll never forget the sight when we pulled up to that half finished church building at 6:30 AM that first morning, and there were already about 100 people lined up waiting to be seen.

We piled out of our vans and we began setting up the makeshift clinic. Being unskilled labor, my job was quite simple: lift heavy boxes, set up tables, and keep small children entertained while their parents saw the doctors and nurses.

Because I had just enough Spanish to get myself in trouble, I was asked to man the "pharmacy" for a very brief stint. I filled prescriptions and tried explain to patients how to administer their medications. This only lasted until I met with a patient being treated for an eye infection. I was to prescribe her some antibacterial eyedrops and to tell her "*Pone dos gotas in sus ojos.*" That is, "Place two drops in your eyes." But instead of telling her to place *dos gotas*, two drops, in her eyes, I told her to place *dos gatos*, two cats, in her eyes. She looked at me like, "What kind of crazy, voodoo medicine is this?" and I was quickly relieved of my duties as the resident pharmacist.

So I was placed back on "heavy things and children" duty – that is, until lunch time.

Around noon, word came to us that the village had prepared lunch for us and that we ought to take a break to go eat. The skilled-labor (our doctors and nurses) refused to break with so many patients still waiting to be seen. So, I gathered up all the unskilled labor and took them over to the community square, where they had set up lunch for us.

As we walked in, the whole room, filled with a couple hundred people, stood and applauded us – though most of us had done nothing more than play soccer with kids all morning. They showed us to the food and invited us to fix our plates first. We did. Then they showed us to the table of honor in the middle of the room and asked us to be seated. We were. They invited us to begin eating. So we did.

And about halfway through my plate, I looked up and realized we were the only ones eating. Of the 200 people in the room, the only people eating were the ones who could afford doctors of our own, college tuition, and all the food we wanted. This community was so poor that even when they pooled their money together, they could not provide enough chicken for everyone – only for their guests of honor.

They all turned out to celebrate *us* and to watch us eat the food they could not afford for themselves, but had purchased, prepared, and served to us. The people of that village had *taken* what little they had and they *blessed* it and they *broke* it and they *gave* it to us.

And in that moment, my eyes were opened, and I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I was in the presence of the risen Christ. Only this time his body was made up of many members, and they lived in a village outside the city of Juarez in Mexico.

For the life of me, I cannot remember the name of that little village. But in my mind, it is called Emmaus.

Paula D'Arcy has said that God comes to us disguised as our lives.

I think the same can be said of the risen Christ. He is with us even when we are unaware – taking us, blessing us, breaking us, and giving us as his gift of love to a world in need.

Happy Easter, First Baptist family! I'll see you in Emmaus.

Amen.