

THE EMMAUS ENCOUNTER

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Grace Church in New York
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When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (Luke 24:30-31)

Among the most recognizable landmarks in the United States, San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge would surely be high on the list. Here in New York we have many beautiful, historic bridges – even one that was the biggest in the world until 1981. But at the end of the day we seem to keep a level head about them; we know that they are just bridges. Not so for people in the Bay area and beyond. For them the Golden Gate Bridge is not merely a bridge, but a work of art, a living thing, a symbolic road, a gateway to another life. This iconic nature of the Golden Gate Bridge also has a downside. More suicides have occurred along its nearly 9,000 foot span than any other place on earth. The first was only three months after the bridge opened in 1937. A disillusioned veteran of World War One named Harold Wobber announced to another pedestrian on the walkway, "This is as far as I go," and disappeared over the edge. Since then people have jumped to their deaths into the frigid waters of the San Francisco Bay at a rate of one every two weeks. Authorities are always on the alert for the despondent, solitary person slowly walking along and pausing at the rail of the pedestrian path.

Incredibly, a few people have survived the 220-foot plunge from the Golden Gate Bridge. Two men in particular who have jumped and lived each have a remarkably similar message to preach. In 1985 Ken Baldwin was 28-years old and suffering through his second year of an intractable depression. He reports that he parked his car, walked to the middle of the bridge, counted to ten, and froze. He counted to ten once more and jumped. "I still see my hands coming off the railing," he said. "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I'd thought was unfixable was totally fixable – except for having just jumped."

Kevin Hines now also champions life. In 2000 he was 18-years old and struggling with bipolar disorder. He went to the bridge and jumped. He remembers the instant he went over the edge: "My first thought was 'What the hell did I just do? I don't want to die.'" Miraculously, he did not die. Now Hines and Baldwin lead productive lives, encouraging people along the road of depression, disillusionment, and despair. It's as if these two have come back from the dead to encounter us with a bracing message of hope.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we meet two despondent travelers slowly walking and pausing along the road to Emmaus. One is named Cleopas, the other is unnamed, but is possibly Mary, the wife of Cleopas. The Gospel of John mentions a "Mary, the wife of Clopas" present at the crucifixion of Jesus, and it could be that Cleopas and Clopas are the same person. In any case, Luke tells us that they were followers of Jesus. They had considered Jesus a prophet mighty in deed and word, and they had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. One of the key phrases in Luke's famous story is right there: "*But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.*" They had hoped that Jesus was the one who would inaugurate a kingdom that would supplant the kingdom of Rome. They had hoped that in Jesus something new under the sun really could happen. Jesus had been the talk of every household in Jerusalem. He attracted the attention of all the Jewish and Roman movers and shakers. Of all the messianic pretenders,

Jesus alone seemed poised to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, and forever change the way things were.

But as the two travelers talked on the road to Emmaus, their conversation might well have been titled “Good-bye To All That.” When I read about Harold Wobber, the first suicide victim on the Golden Gate Bridge, I remembered the famous autobiography of Robert Graves. *Good-bye To All That* tells of the global disillusionment in the wake of World War One. The glorious “war to end all wars” didn’t rescue old Europe as promised, it ended it. The great promise had died a horrible death in the forsaken trenches of France, just as all great promises die, just as surely and horribly as the great promise of Jesus had died on a forsaken hill outside of Jerusalem. Disillusionment and despair were the result. The crucifixion spoke loudly that Jesus had not redeemed Israel. He had died a shameful death, failing utterly to supplant the oppression of Roman rule, leaving things exactly as they had been for longer than anyone could remember.

I’m going to take it for granted here that you listened to the account of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. You heard how Cleopas and his companion welcomed a stranger who joined them on the journey. And you know that when they finally reached Emmaus, *then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus; and he vanished from their sight*. Some scholars believe that with the phrase “their eyes were opened,” Luke was planting a clue. He was connecting the two travelers to other Biblical figures who would fit the phrase, *their eyes were opened*: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, whose eyes were opened to a new and unpleasant reality after their disobedience; old Simeon in the Temple, who declared “mine eyes have seen thy salvation;” even the blind to whom Jesus gave sight. Luke’s intention was to anchor these two travelers to Emmaus in the great sweep of salvation history, and through them show that God delivers on his promises. In Jesus, God reversed Adam’s curse, and redeemed Israel. In Jesus, God did indeed win the decisive victory over evil and death. This victory, this new kingdom now begun, this bracing message of hope is what Luke believes the two travelers recognized, and wants us to recognize as well. Luke wants us, today, to see God’s redeeming work, so that we, too, can join the list of those whose *eyes were opened*.

What is it that opens our eyes? What is it that can turn sadness into joy, and resurrect the spirits of the people who walk in darkness? Note well that the Easter experience for the two travelers had a flashpoint. The uncontainable joy that propelled them back to Jerusalem could not have been about their recognizing the nuances of salvation history. It certainly had nothing to do with the warm glow or the nostalgic ache you feel when you contemplate a dead loved one or friend. Rather, when *their eyes were opened*, they realized that they were in the presence of the living, risen Jesus. It really was him. They were face-to-face with the last person they expected to encounter: Jesus, who had returned from the dead, shared with them the bread of heaven, and gave them a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

Cleopas and his companion had to encounter Jesus for themselves. And so do we in whatever stage of disillusionment, despair, or delirium we happen to be. So do we need to encounter Jesus for ourselves if our eyes are ever going to be opened to the kingdom of God in our midst. It’s one thing to know some facts about Jesus, and perhaps appreciate Luke’s literary talent in telling the story about him. It’s quite another thing, however, to encounter the living Lord personally. But how do we meet him? How can we encounter Jesus in such a way that our hearts burn within us? How can we shout “The Lord is risen indeed,” not just because the phrase is printed in the bulletin, but as a result of being in his living presence? These are questions that trouble and puzzle many people who truly want to know Jesus, but find him little more than a frustrating figure of ancient history. To address these frustrations, I believe we can detect on the road to Emmaus a pattern of Christian practice that has opened many an eye to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living. So let me highlight four things that Cleopas and his wife did

on their journey; what they did on the road to Emmaus, you and I can do as well. Mind you now: I don't mean to suggest you can produce the presence of Jesus with four easy steps. You cannot make him appear like a genie out of a lamp you rub. That being said, I do see four practices here that can help to open our eyes to an encounter with the Lord as he meets us through the waters and fires of life.

Here's the first: Luke says that *two of them were ... talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.* Two of them were walking and talking together. What this says to me is that Jesus makes himself known to us when, with another person, we engage in honest discussion, questioning, exchange of opinion, and speculation about who God is, who we are, and what it all might mean. When you can say to another person, "I've thought the same thing about God," or "I've had that dream," or "I know that frustration," you sample a foretaste of the communion, the fellowship of the saints. So consider this: find one person with whom you can share your spiritual doubts, questions, hunches, fears, and hopes – someone with whom you schedule regular time to discuss where you are with the Lord. Jesus said, "wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." And on the road to Emmaus, *while they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.* How about you? Do you walk and talk with another person as you try to cross the bridge?

The two travelers' eyes were opened for a second reason: they welcomed the stranger. *Stay with us,* they said. So Luke reveals to us today that Jesus meets us as a stranger on the road. The appearances of the risen Jesus are fleeting, unpredictable, even unrecognizable at first. Note well that the travelers didn't recognize Jesus, and then when they did he vanished from their sight. This gives me a mild case of theological heart-burn, just as the travelers' hearts burned within them. Who knows whether or not the stranger I met and perhaps dismissed was Jesus? A San Francisco therapist tells the haunting story of one of his patients who jumped from the bridge and died. The young man's suicide note read: "I'm going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump." What an awful and selfish burden to have put on society, but there it is. Do you want to meet Jesus? Then find ways to welcome the stranger – not an easy task in a city full of potentially dangerous people who will take a mile if you give them an inch. But sometimes a simple smile can convey the grace of God.

Here's a third reason why the two travelers' eyes were opened on the road to Emmaus: *And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.* What this says to me is that Jesus makes himself known through the Scriptures and our study of it. The two travelers met Jesus because they studied the Bible. They took the time to read and listen, and they discovered that God had been telling them all along how their redemption was to occur. How about you? Do you take the time to read the Bible? Have you been part of a Bible study group? Jesus draws near when we do.

Finally, the fourth reason why two travelers' eyes were opened to see Jesus with them: *When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him.* Jesus reveals himself to us in the breaking of bread -- in the sacrament of his body and blood. Christ mysteriously meets us in our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. He comes to us from heaven with a foretaste of the great banquet being prepared for us. It is a pledge of eternal life. It is strength to carry on.

When I was growing up Thanksgiving Day was always a big deal at our house. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and children would all gather and wait for the feast. The task of preparing the turkey always fell to my mother and her parents – my grandparents. Throughout the day the three of them would occupy the secret chambers of the kitchen: conferring,

conversing, and otherwise hobnobbing about the sacred, simmering mysteries they were preparing. Meanwhile the rest of us languished in the living room, perhaps watched a little football, and grew hungrier by the moment as the aroma of turkey and all the fixings filled the house. Would we ever eat? At length my grandfather would emerge from the kitchen with a small plate. On it was a foretaste of things to come. He had begun to carve the turkey, and to us who waited he brought pieces of the beautiful brown and crispy skin. It was the assurance of things hoped for. It opened our eyes to the things not yet seen.

Today, when we reach over the rail with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, take them as a bracing message of hope from the other side. Take them as a pledge that Christ will encounter you on whatever road you are traveling, on whatever bridge you are trying to cross. The Holy One of Israel is with you. He lives. He is risen. He is eager to draw near and meet you.

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The information about the Golden Gate Bridge is found in “Jumpers,” an article by Tad Friend that appeared in the October 13, 2003 edition of *The New Yorker*.

Ironically, today’s edition of *The New York Times* included an article about a New York City bridge entitled, “Tappan Zee is Grim Lure For Souls In Trouble.”