

# Abiding With Jesus

Sermon, April 30, 2017

Texts: Psalm 116, Luke 24:13-35

In the days before paved highways and electricity, people tended to stay put when it got dark. They rarely went out at night; they even more rarely traveled. In the lectionary Gospel reading for this Third Sunday of Easter, it was the approaching nightfall that prompted two forlorn travelers on the road to Emmaus to invite their new walking companion to join them: *"Stay with us, because it is nearly evening and the day is almost over."* A thousand years after that Emmaus road experience and for over a thousand years after that, that simple invitation would be repeated nightly by monks around the world offering end-of-the-day vesper prayers: *"Mane nobiscum Domine, quoniam advesperascit."* Which is Latin for, *"Stay with us Lord, for the evening falls."* In the year 1847, Anglican pastor Henry Lyte opened his greatest hymn with that same invitation: *"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide."* Henry Lyte's body was riddled with tuberculosis at the time, and as the dark shadows of the evening of his life were falling (*he had actually preached his last sermon the Sunday before, and would pass away days after he penned this hymn*) he expressed his sure and certain hope in the lyrics to this grand hymn, a hymn we will sing following the sermon as our Affirmation of Faith.

As our Gospel passage opens these two disciples are walking back home, back to the world they had known before they had met Jesus, before the whole project had come crashing down around them with Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, execution, and burial. Yes, we're told they had heard some of the women had gone back to the tomb and found it empty, and these women said they saw an angel who told them Jesus was alive. But who could believe them? Would you? Would any of us? These two despondent disciples had certainly not seen Jesus. As they walked along, a third person comes up and begins to walk with them. **We** are told this person is Jesus, but they weren't ... the two don't recognize Him, at least not yet. As they walked along Jesus asked them, *"So, what are you talking about?"* Or, to put it even more in the vernacular, *"What's happening?"* The text tells us, *"They stood still, their faces downcast."* I'm admittedly reading between the lines a bit, but I think they were sort of stunned, dumbfounded and were just stopped in their tracks that this fellow traveler who obviously had been around that weekend in Jerusalem was apparently completely unaware of the recent events that had just rocked their world. One of them asked, and I think a bit incredulously, *"Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what the things that have happened here?"* Jesus responds (*and I'm sure with something of a twinkle in His eye*), **"What things?"**

Now, Jerusalem was a big town, and the chances are good a lot of folks completely missed the death of Jesus ... it's understandable that someone may not have known about the events that so upended the lives of these two forlorn travelers. Those of you who have grieved the loss of a loved one know something of why they reacted as they did. When you lose someone you cherish, when something bad happens to someone you love (*for that matter, when something bad happens to you*), it can be almost infuriating that life just goes on for others. It's not entirely rational, but it is how you feel. You want to bite the person's head off who doesn't seem to care for or be affected by or even know about what's going on in your life, but in reality it may just be that person has no idea why you are reacting in such a rude or touchy or ill tempered manner. This is a quick aside, but 17th century theologian Jeremy Taylor used to counsel aspiring ministers, *"Speak kindly to everyone you meet, for everyone has a problem."* Everyone has some sort of battle and/emotional difficulty he or she is fighting; all of us have our battles. The great 20th century theologian ... Ann Landers ... once wrote, *"Be kind to people. The world needs kindness so much. You never know what sort of battles other people are fighting. Often just a soft word or a warm compliment can be immensely supportive. You can do a great deal of good by just being considerate, by extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word."* We come across people every single day who are being beat up by ... life. Be patient, be kind, be understanding.

Another little aside: We are told one of the disciples was called Cleopas. (*After thirty-three years of ordained ministry, I learned another new thing this week!*)<sup>1</sup> Use a Bible concordance and look up the name "Cleopas," you will find this name referenced one other time, in John 19:25 -- *"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene."* So, the wife of Cleopas (*named Mary*) was present at the crucifixion. And if it's the same Cleopas, there is no reason not to assume his wife Mary was the other person on this road to Emmaus; they were a husband and wife traveling together (*there is nothing in the text saying these were two men*). She had been present at the cross. She had seen Jesus crucified, she saw the nails driven into His hands, she saw the spear thrust into His side, and I'm sure she told her husband all about it. They had no doubt Christ was dead. So, Cleopas and Mary (*if, indeed, it is them*) are probably trying hard to suppress their grief, their hopelessness and their irritation with this idiot who doesn't know what's going on: *"Don't you know what has happened? Jesus is dead. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed. We had hoped He would be the one to restore Israel. We had hoped He would be the one to set us free."*

*"We had hoped..."* Those are perhaps the three saddest words in all the Old and New Testaments. *"We had hoped..."* Now, they no longer hoped. Now, their hope was dead. Now they had no hope. Things were just not

<sup>1</sup> Article where I learned this: <http://www.jesus.org/death-and-resurrection/resurrection/who-were-the-disciples-on-the-road-to-emmaus.html>

going to change. This was the way it was. Their hope had no future. Only a week before, their hope had risen to fever pitch when the excited crowds welcomed their Master waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna.” But now, with Jesus dead, their hope died, as well. I’ve mentioned this before when we’ve looked at this passage, but some of the saddest words in the English language begin with the letter “D” ... death, disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, discouragement, depression, despair. To be fair, some happy words, too, begin with “D” ... doggy, daisy, delightful, and doughnuts from Allie’s (*that some very nice person left in a bag on my office chair between services; thank you!*). But many of those bad “D” words sum up how this couple was feeling as they trudged that road to Emmaus. *Disappointment. Disillusionment. Defeat. Doubt. Discouragement. Despondency. Depression. Despair.* And yes, we know something of what they felt. At some time or another, I’m sure any one of us here this morning has said, “*We had hoped...*” “*We had hoped the illness would be healed. We had hoped this political figure would be the one to lead us toward change, prosperity, peace. We had hoped our trusted institutions would uphold time honored ethical and moral values. We had hoped people we trusted would have honored their word. We had hoped things would improve. We had hoped (fill in the blank).* There isn’t a person here who can’t identify with the feelings expressed by those three saddest words in the Bible, “**We. Had. Hoped.**”

What do we do when hope is gone? I’ll suggest two things, both clearly implied in this passage. **First**, tell Jesus about it, and second, with His aid read and review and engage the Scriptures! In short, *pray and study your Bible!* This couple did not realize they were doing it, but *they talked to Jesus about it.* They told Jesus all about their disappointed hope. Then, Jesus helped them to understand how the Scriptures really did relate to what they were going through. When they took their despair to Jesus, Jesus brought them to the Bible and revealed these words in a whole, new, hope-full way. And we are told their “*hearts burned within them*” as their hope was re-kindled. “*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear, what a privilege to carry, everything to Him in prayer.*” Whatever has caused you to lose hope, talk to Jesus about it, and then go to the Scriptures and ask Him to teach you through these pages the truth about *what really is*, ask Him to teach you the truth of your perceived disappointment. If we are not engaging the Scriptures in this manner we are *seriously* depriving ourselves of a tremendous source of hope.

Back in 2014 <sup>2</sup> I told you something I learned at a meeting of the Presbytery of Southern New England (*held Sept. 13, 2014 at the Dunn’s Corners church in Westerly*). The moderator called attention to a somewhat newly released survey from the Barna Group entitled “America’s Most and Least Bible Minded Cities.” Summarized from the Barna Group website: “*A new study from Barna takes a look at how 96 of the largest cities in the nation view the Bible. The report ranks the most and least ‘Bible-minded’ cities by looking at how people in those cities view the Bible. The study is based on 42,855 interviews conducted nationwide; Bible minded individuals were [considered] those who both engage and esteem the Christian scriptures, who report reading the Bible in a typical week, and who strongly assert the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches.*” Raise your hand if you remember which city came in dead last in the nation at number 96. That’s right. Providence, Rhode Island.

I said at the time if people in last place Providence are ever going to become Bible minded, if people in last place Providence are ever going to “*...engage and esteem the Christian scriptures,*” it has to start with us in the centers of worship! Do we read our Bibles? Do we assert the Bible as accurate in the principles it teaches? Do we “*engage and esteem*” the Scriptures? This is a sermon in itself, but people who engage and esteem the Scriptures are people who don’t criticize and critique the Bible so much as they allow the Bible to criticize and critique them (*as a young man I first went to a seminary that primarily did the former, I left after two months to eventually attend a seminary emphasizing the latter and it made all the difference in my life and ministry.*) **John 8:31** – “*Jesus said, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed’*”

One last story: Every fall for the past fourteen or so years I have been invited to officially welcome the Bible Study Fellowship women who meet in our church each Monday. I always tell those gathered that my late wife would definitely have been there with them if she was with us today. Many of you know this, but my wife and I met in Germany; I served five years at the American Protestant Church in Bonn, and she came to Bonn to work with Campus Crusade ... she primarily organized and led bilingual Bible studies for women working in the professional and diplomatic community of the then West German capital. She had a passion for leading women’s Bible studies because it was in such a group that her life was so dramatically changed for the better. Ann came to Christian faith while working for the State Department in Washington DC, largely through the ministry of National Presbyterian Church and a women’s bible study held there; she was not raised in a church going family. Through that women’s Bible study at National Presbyterian Church, my wife learned of a gracious Savior who comes alongside us on the “roads” of this life, a Savior Who loves us and really wants the best for us, a Savior who wants to abide with us in our lives and invites us to abide in Him AND to abide in His good Word. I still remember how enthusiastically she would describe those early years as a new believer, vividly recounting how she would see words just leap off the pages of the Bible as she understood their meanings, practical words about life and how to live it with joy, contentment and purpose. Through those pages she learned about a Savior who gave her hope and joy and purpose, she learned about a Savior with whom she wanted to abide ... and now she does abide with Him forever.

*“Mane nobiscum Domine, quoniam advesperascit.”* Abide with us, Lord ... and May we abide in You and Your word.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/questioning-authority.pdf>