

# Abide With Us

## Sermon, April 23, 2023

### Texts: Psalm 116, Luke 24:13-35

*(The sermon was edited for time; unfortunately, the part that was edited out was also the part that inspired the original title, "What Do You No?" That is now next week's sermon!)*

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 who were walking back to what was probably their home to invite their intriguing 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 thousand years, 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 of our closing hymn.

As our Gospel passage opens these two disciples of Jesus 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 taken place there that 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, Who could have responded, *"Well, I'm the One who was at the center of all that!"* instead 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 disciples. Those of you who have grieved the loss of a loved one know something of why they may have 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 almost 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 what's going on with you. A quick aside: 17<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 day who are just being beat up by ... life. Be patient, be kind, be understanding.

Another little aside, one we talked about at our Thursday night Fellowship Dinner: We are told one of the disciples was called Cleopas (*I just learned this in 2017, after some thirty-three years of ordained ministry*).<sup>1</sup> Use a Bible concordance and look up the name "Cleopas," you will find this name referenced just 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,

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<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>

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 close up, 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 Jesus 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 dolt 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 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, doughnuts from Allie's..* But many of those bad "D" words sum up how this couple was feeling as they trudged that road to Emmaus. *Disappointed Disillusioned. Defeated. Doubting.. Discouraged. Despondent. Depressed. Despairing. Desolate.* 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 prosperity and peace. We had hoped our trusted institutions would uphold time-honored ethical and moral values. 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 read your Bible!* This couple did not realize they were doing so at the time, 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. Now, it is likely these two knew their Scriptures, but Jesus revealed these familiar 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 grief to bear, what a privilege to carry, everything to Him in prayer.*" The sad words, "*We had hoped,*" are transformed to, "*We now hope again.*" Where before they had *no* hope, now they *know* hope. It sounds like almost a trite point to make, but the principle is nevertheless true: We also need to take our disappointment to Jesus, and then go to the Scriptures and ask Him to teach us the truth about our perceived disappointment. Again, where before they had *no* hope, now they *know* hope. 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 with the guidance of our Lord we are *seriously* depriving ourselves of a tremendous source of rekindled hope.

I told you something I learned at a meeting of the Presbytery of Southern New England held Sept. 13, 2014 at Dunn's Corners church in Westerly. The moderator called attention to a newly released survey from the Barna Group: "*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*" and find real hope, 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? And do we talk to Jesus as we do so? This is a sermon in itself, but people who engage and esteem and know 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.*)

Jesus said in John 8:31 – "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed." "*Mane nobiscum Domine, quoniam advesperascit.*" Abide with us, Lord ... and May we abide in You and Your word.