

“A New Road Lies Ahead” – Easter 3 - Luke 24:13:35

When you heard the phrase “to a village called Emmaus” I suspect you gave a kind of a knowing nod, because that phrase rings a very familiar bell in our minds. If pushed a bit, I think most people can come up with at least a couple of the key parts of the story. Not many people, however, remember the smaller details and we even tend to gloss over them when reading or hearing the story. That’s too bad, because those unusual details provide a fascinating link between this story and our own experiences. Once we start to dig deeper into this “road to Emmaus” episode we discover some fascinating components that are more like those from one of the old Bob Hope – Bing Crosby “Road to ...” movies than from a typical gospel story.

The highlights of the story are familiar – a couple of guys are trudging along the road to Emmaus, talking about what had happened the past few days in Jerusalem. A stranger joins them (and wink-wink-nudge-nudge *we* know with ironic excitement that it is Jesus) and asks them, “whazzup?” They tell him what’s happened, and all the exciting things about the ministry of Jesus. Jesus launches into a long bible study and eventually they invite him in to supper. When he blesses and breaks bread in communion with them they recognize him, he disappears, and they babble on.

That’s pretty much the story as we remember it, isn’t it? We know, especially at this time of year when we’ve spent the past several weeks recalling the events leading up to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, trial and execution, we know that this is a resurrection story – a story (unique to Luke’s gospel) about the risen Christ. This is one of the stories in our faith that we cherish, and love to hear. But much like watching a favourite old movie, we tend to watch it, savour the emotions, and then tuck it back on the shelf until the next time.

We should, however, do a little more with this cherished story than merely tuck it back on the shelf. To begin, we might look at a number of small details in the narrative that emphasise the deep meanings that underlie the heart-warming story, even though some of these details are rather unflattering about the two who were part of this “road to ...” saga. Note carefully their reaction as Jesus asks them what they were talking about: “They stood still, looking sad.” What a profound little detail to include. It is so personal, so intimate that it instantly draws us sympathetically into the scene. We can relate. We can immediately feel again those painful times when we have been remembering and rehashing moments of loss and fresh grief, and how when someone intruded we also stood still, and looked and felt sad. With that tiny detail we are instantly connected with those two, sharing with them not only the excitements of the past few days but also the overwhelming sense of something grand and cosmic and profound having been lost.

The next little, but important, detail reveals just how deeply the two travelers were feeling their grief. One of them, named Cleopas, responds to Jesus’ question as to what they were discussing. This is the only place in scripture that we meet this person, and so have no other ideas about who Cleopas was or what happened to him. But after a sad pause, Cleopas replies with what might in other circumstances be considered sarcasm, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn’t know what has happened?” I suspect many of us have snapped a biting reply at one time or another, and most often wish later we hadn’t reacted so harshly. Most people, thank God, also understand how those in grief and in pain are a bit short-tempered, and do not take offense. Jesus, also “thank God”, is the prime example and model of such tolerant and caring behaviour. Instead of reacting with offense, Jesus pastorally and patiently draws forth the best from those two. “What things?”, he asks simply, and they pour out a full summary of the events that have overwhelmed and saddened them.

The next small detail that brings home the reality of these two on the “road to ...” was their dismissing the women’s vision of the angels proclaiming that Jesus was alive. To be sure, they acknowledge that “some of those who were with us” actually saw the tomb was empty, but those women must have been fantasizing, or something, because who could believe such a wild story? I mean, angels and things, and alive? I don’t think so! How easy it is to see in these two characters real characteristics we recognize in others, and even sometimes in ourselves if we have the courage. How quick we can be to disbelieve and dismiss the experiences of other people; how quickly we marginalize them and move them and their experiences to somewhere on the “outside”. It’s amazing to hear Jesus’ reply to those two: just as the two move from a paralyzing sadness to an arrogant dismissal of the experience of the women of their group, so Jesus moves from a quiet pastoral invitation to a direct challenge. “Oh, how foolish you are!” Jesus chides them. Including such an unflattering challenge to these two spiritual pilgrims and thus avoiding a sugar-coated hyping of Jesus puts a most powerful stamp of reality upon these events.

Finally, there is that self-congratulatory claim by these two travelers. Congratulating each other, and reassuring each other with the claim, “didn’t our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road?” Well, maybe, but it has a bit of the hollow ring of perfect 20/20 vision in hindsight to me. I can’t help thinking that Luke was a bit “tongue-in-cheek” as he quoted them. It’s kind of common, isn’t it, how people are able to re-assess their previous thinking and behaviour in much more flattering terms after some profound insight, isn’t it? I think we can all recall with perhaps some embarrassment how we have done the same thing.

All in all, these little, uncomplimentary, unflattering details in the story make these two characters come alive, and emphasise in a powerfully clear way how real the events of this story were, and continue to be. Very real events, happening to very real people just like you and me. That’s the power of this affirmation of Jesus, risen victorious over death, approaching and appearing to ordinary people like you and me.

It’s no wonder this is one of our favourite stories, because it is well told and we are drawn into the story by connecting with the two strangers. But there’s a bigger question that remains. These two pilgrims, walking down the road to Emmaus, are caught up in a resurrection experience – so what new road did they walk down afterwards? I know, the narrative tells us that they returned to Jerusalem “within the hour,” but what new road or roads did they travel after having received the new life in communion with the risen Christ?

We don’t know for sure, we can only speculate what happened to them from this point on, but it would seem that they surely told and retold their resurrection story over and over again until the details were seared into the memory of the faith community to be written down more than half a century later. I think we can safely assume that life after this resurrection experience was quite different for them than it was before. With a new and deeper understanding and perspective on God’s involvement in the world, particularly in the continuing closeness of Christ in communion with his followers, I’m sure we could claim that the two travelers proclaimed God’s gracious act in the death and resurrection of Jesus on all the new roads down which they traveled.

And so there is one more lingering question – what new road or roads will we travel down in our resurrection life? We are but one short year from moving into our magnificent new facility – which seems like a long time from now but which will soon engulf us like a tsunami. What new roads, what new paths, what new opportunities to serve Christ in our communities will this event provide us? We can’t know for sure until it actually happens, but now is a good

time to start dreaming, and hoping, and planning. Hopefully we will be able to offer people a beacon of hope in a world that seems increasingly chaotic. With our kitchen facilities we should be able to offer not only meals to those who are hungry for both food and social connection but also to offer instruction to seniors and others cooking tips to help stretch limited food budgets. We anticipate being able to work closely with the Vancouver School of Theology (VST) to provide educational opportunities to those who couldn't otherwise make it out to the UBC campus. Food bank, community breakfasts, bread ministries, hosting youth groups visiting Vancouver are all activities we hope to resume, but there are so many more possibilities!

This is a wondrous time for Central to do some significant reflection upon our future both as a congregation and as individuals. As individuals we have received new and abundant life in our communion with the risen Christ just as the two on the road did, and we are faced with exactly the same question of which new road or roads we will travel down together in our walk of faith. Sometimes the choice of the path will be easy, just like moving out onto a brand new highway – crisp, clear paint lines highlighted by pristine black pavement, wide and level, inviting a smooth and rapid passage to some far-off destination. Other times the path will be more of a goat-track; narrow, rocky, debris-filled, challenging, and with a destination that at times seems either unsure or out of reach or both.

And yet, whether smooth and wide, or narrow and difficult, on every new road down which we travel in our faith journey we can be assured that Christ is ready to interrupt us, and ask us, “what are you talking about?” and even more he is always ready to take the time to help us to understand just how magnificent and everlasting God's glory is, and how gracious, and how much we are loved.

So, fellow pilgrims, set out on your journeys down a new road, with all confidence and hope that the destination – the kingdom of God – is there waiting for you, with Christ waiting to greet you with open arms.