

### We Had Hoped

It was a scene all too familiar for some of you. The hospital in those wee hours of the morning was marked by that eerie silence, most rooms and corridors shrouded in shadows, a few places garishly lit, the light so stark it hurt your eyes. “Chaplain,” she said, her voice flat with fatigue and grief, “we want you to baptize our baby.” The couple was pitifully young, the mother in a hospital bed, holding a tiny bundle. The father, across the room in a chair, made little eye contact, as distant from her as if he might have been on another planet, the grief sitting like a huge barrier between them. Nothing was right. Sillborn. Who knew what happened, what the circumstances were. Two figures, alone. “But we had hoped. . . .”

That day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus. . . and talking with each other about all these things that had happened, “how our chief priests and leaders handed Jesus over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped. A familiar tale, this Emmaus Road story. Listen, though, as Bible scholar Ched Myers rescues it from a frequently sentimentalized reading:

As our disciples are “hightailing it for the border” so they can lay low for a while, Luke tells us they “were discussing all the things that had happened.” No doubt! This was likely an animated conversation between labored breaths and anxious glances over their shoulders. They were probably blaming each other for the mess they’d gotten into, wondering what their next move might be, lamenting Roman kangaroo justice, cursing the colonizers, even cursing Jesus for failing to deliver on his promises of a new social order. They had a lot to talk about, but this was no peripatetic philosophical wander. This was a grief-laden, scared stiff, and contentious debriefing under the Shadow of Death.

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You encounter this pair of frightened disciples often in your ministry. Journeying down an unchosen, unwanted path under the Shadow of Death. Grief laden, scared stiff. Maybe it’s a family wrestling with end of life decisions. Maybe it’s an elderly person confronting what one has quaintly but pointedly described as aging’s “gathering of diminishment.” Maybe it’s a person waiting for a potentially devastating diagnosis. Maybe it’s a troubled soul struggling with the allure of suicide amid the abyss of depression. Maybe it’s a twenty-something person dealing with her parents’ rejection, or a mother whose son has drifted perilously toward a far country, or a father whose daughter resists rehab. Maybe it’s someone struggling to learn how to deal with a disabling injury. Maybe it’s a newly processed inmate, suddenly confronting the reality of a twenty year sentence. “We had hoped,” they all say. Hoped for something quite different in life. Hoped for very different outcomes. Hoped for very different futures.

Grief-laden, scared stiff. This journey along the Emmaus Road in the long and ominous shadow of Golgatha is no peripatetic philosophical wander. But a seemingly endless, chronic and contentious debriefing under the Shadow of Death. We had hoped.

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus came near and went with them.” This redeemer, this wounded healer, this chaplain par excellence comes near and goes with them on their road, under the shadow of death which is, in fact, his own death. Notice what he does. First, he listens for *their* questions, ponders *their* concerns, avoids rushing in to fix. “Boys, have I got news for you. It’s me, Jesus! Nothing to worry about now.” No, “what are you discussing while you walk along?” A Lutheran missionary in Guyana describes being awakened early one morning to come to the home of Aunt Ruby who had been refusing to eat for several days because her neighbor cast a spell on her food. “If I eat I will get the evil spirits. I can’t eat. I can’t.”

As a small town central Wisconsin native, the topic of evil spirits was not a topic of conversation I was raised with. I cannot recall any of my relatives ever complaining of evil spirits in their pancakes! And because of my Midwestern upbringing, my first instinct on that Wednesday morning was to roll my eyes and disregard Aunt Ruby’s fears.

Instead, this young pastor listened, provided encouragement, reminded her that her neighbor’s evil spell had no power over her and that God’s love would protect her, that faith removes fear. He repeated Jesus’ instruction to pray for one’s enemies, and then, he writes “hesitating for just a moment, I told her that if God’s armor of protection is placed upon people, why should the ‘shield of faith’ not also extend to their breakfast?” “What are *you* talking about while you walk along under this Shadow of Death?”

Then, after listening, Jesus responds, not with answers, but by placing himself and his two friends into the grand sweep of God’s narrative of redemption. “Beginning with Moses and the prophets. . . .” Sometimes it’s healing to know that it’s not all about you, about what you want, about what you think you need. “Chaplain, we want you to baptize our baby.” It would have been easy to find water and do the ritual.” It was obviously what she assumed should be done, perhaps had been told should be done. But after conversation it became clear that baptism in fact meant little to them. So I said, “in our tradition we don’t baptize still born children. But we do have rituals of blessing and liturgies of healing for you and your child.” It didn’t matter to them that I made it up as I went along, a service of scripture, of prayer, of touch, above all of holding her baby, of opening the blanket to gaze on the child’s tiny face, to touch it, acknowledge it. It was something her husband couldn’t do in the face of that great Shadow. And it allowed her to be swept into the greater narrative of God’s love where her life, her loss could join something larger and be touched by something more lasting than the dashed hopes and the shadowy death that seemed to encompass everything that night.

And then Jesus waits for an invitation. “Stay with us.” Which means he was prepared to be sent off with little more than a farewell while they stopped for their evening meal. It happens sometimes, doesn’t it? You walk along side. You open the

Scriptures from Moses to the prophets. And then they say good-bye, sometimes with a “thank you,” sometimes not. It’s difficult. A good reminder, of course, that in this case it’s not all about you, about your need to be needed. But hospitality cannot be coerced. For hospitality to heal, it must be freely offered. What could be more empowering to those staggering down an Emmaus Road before the Shadow of Death than to be given the authority to invite, to welcome, to share. Stay with us. There “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” No longer was it only the shadow of death that hounded them; now it was another presence that burned into them. And the desperate road of escape became the graceful, courageous, even joyful road of return.

My young couple called the next day and invited me to preside over their child’s burial. We Protestants don’t carry a large assortment of sacramental rites to offer; I suspect it impoverishes us and our ministry. Too many words vainly seeking to make up for our lack of mystery. But sometimes the sacramental happens even without a “big S” sacrament. As the funeral director started to reach for the tiny casket near the grave site, I stepped in and asked him to wait. “Carry your baby’s casket,” I said to the father, the distant partner too stricken even to touch his wife days before. He nodded, lifted the burden, heartbreaking and precious, and with his wife by his side walked to the grave. Was it too much to hope, to believe, that this was an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace? Did not our hearts burn within us?

I love a story that was shared with me by a former chaplain of Emmaus Homes in St. Charles, Missouri. Ethel, a resident of the community, was one of the tour guides for the UCC church groups that regularly visit this venerable home for developmentally disabled people founded by our forebears in the Evangelical Synod. As you might suspect from its name, Emmaus is the proud, or at least the patient owner of numerous amateur paintings of the Emmaus road story. One hangs over the door in the lobby. A former chaplain recalls one day watching Ethel point to the painting and saying to the good church people with evident pride, “And this shows when Jesus came to Emmaus, in St. Charles, Missouri!” The history and geography weren’t very good. The theology could not have been better.

Your challenged and cherished ministries are often carried out on the Emmaus Road where the grief stricken and the scared-stiff flee before a very real Shadow of Death. There you are called to come near, to listen, to open the Scriptures, and then wait for an invitation to break bread at a table spread in the presence of very real enemies. My prayer for you is that in that place Ethel’s truth will become real for you, as for those two on the Road, so that together you may be sent running with courage, with joy, with hope, telling all what happened along the road, and how the Lord of Life had been made known in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

