



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Healing Service: October 16, 2018

Sermon Title: "Our Traveling Companion"

Sermon Text: Luke 24:13-35

We live in a day and age when anyone with an opinion and a smartphone can be an expert and an authority on just about any subject under the sun. Training and expertise are irrelevant, because a blog, a YouTube video, or a Facebook posting has the potential to go viral and spread like wildfire, whether or not it has any credibility or validity. Now if this opinion is a prognostication about the upcoming Penn State football game or the world's ten best meatloaf recipes, then it's pretty harmless. But when it comes to theology, the stakes are considerably higher and some of the so-called experts are downright wrong.

I mention all of this at this *healing service* because one of the worst offenses I see from the Internet theologians is this notion that if you are sick or suffering or going through some sort of crisis, it's all because you aren't doing enough good works. And so the blogs and websites devoted to this brand of works-oriented theology tell you that if you just pray more, fast more, and give more money to the right evangelist, your mental, emotional, physical, and economic problems will be solved.

Let me be perfectly clear. This is a harmful and incorrect understanding of God's Word which fails to recognize that bad things sometimes happen to good people. It is a destructive theology that robs people of hope, stigmatizes those who are experiencing hard times, and paints an image of Jesus as a petty little puppet master who cruelly and manipulatively toys with us. That's not the Lord I worship and know. Nor is it the Lord we are seeking here tonight. But I offer all this *not* as an unsubstantiated opinion, but as truth grounded in God's Word, as we have heard tonight in our reading from Luke's Gospel.

I think we can all identify with Cleopas and his companion in the famous story of the Walk to Emmaus. We've all been in that situation of extreme disappointment, heartache, and the feeling of emptiness, loneliness, and despair when something important to us has gone off the rails, or someone dear to us has died or exited our life. The two traveling companions in our Gospel reading are heading in a very different direction than they had anticipated. Jesus is dead. There is nothing left for them in Jerusalem, and so they are on the road, not so much heading *toward* something, but running *away* from painful memories, dismal circumstances, and the wreckage of what once *was*, but never *can be* again. Have you felt that kind of pain? It's hard to contain it inside. We can't keep it bottled up for long. Sometimes that pain and anxiety quietly oozes out, and sometimes it volcanically erupts from us, turning the people around us into collateral damage. We get a taste of that from Cleopas when he snaps at the stranger: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these

days?” Cleopas is feeling abandoned, lost, and hopeless. His friend and Savior is gone. Maybe you’ve felt the very same way.

Cleopas and his companion may have felt abandoned, but we know that their reality was quite different. Jesus was in fact in their presence, walking alongside them, cognizant of their pain, desirous of bringing them relief, fresh understanding, hope, healing, and new life. But in their pain, Cleopas and his companion were unable to perceive Christ’s presence. They were blinded by their grief and sadness, stuck in an endless loop, reliving every heart wrenching moment of the last few painful days, unable to move beyond.

Do you find yourself in a similar cycle, trapped in your pain? Don’t believe anyone who tells you that your suffering is evidence that Jesus has abandoned you or is angry with you. Your Savior lovingly walks alongside you in a manner that is just as real as what Cleopas and his companion experienced. They began their journey of healing as Jesus unpacked and explained his story, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. Hope began to rekindle as Jesus shared the ancient promises of God, rooted in Holy Scripture, and the eternal truth that while suffering, pain, and even death occur in this life – even to the most faithful people – even to the Son of God himself – suffering, pain, and death never have the last word.

Friends, this is why we immerse ourselves in scripture every time we gather for worship. Our hearts get so worn and weary from a world that revels in the suffering of others, a world that can’t see beyond the next sound bite, election, news cycle, or popular trend, a world that treats the hurting, the vulnerable, and the marginalized as little more than rubbish. In the timeless and grace-filled story of Jesus Christ, we can be re-filled with hope, assurance, confidence, courage, and strength for *our* journey as we cling to Christ’s steadfast promises of forgiveness, mercy, and new life.

Jesus did more than merely walk with Cleopas and his companion. Jesus also actively ministered to them, as he gathered them around a table and broke bread with them. In that holy and sacred moment, at last their eyes were fully opened, and they could see that Jesus was alive. With that realization, *they* finally felt alive again too.

Tonight we are likewise invited to the table with Jesus. We will gather around *this* table in response to an invitation he has proclaimed: an invitation not to those who have kept the law to perfection or who through their own works have achieved total righteousness. No, Jesus calls *here* the broken and imperfect, the lost and the sinful, the scared and the hurting. Here, he will reveal himself again in his body and blood. Our eyes will be opened as we feast and drink deeply of his forgiveness, mercy, and promise of new life. Refilled with hope and refortified by the renewal of Christ’s promises, we will see our circumstances and ourselves in a new light, a light that enables us, encourages us, and inspires us to press forward with determination, joy, and – more than anything else – peace – the peace that passes all understanding – the peace that testifies that in Christ all will be well.

Cleopas and his companion, their hearts burning with the fire of the Holy Spirit, arose from that table as new people – healed people. Their renewed hearts put their spirits back in motion, and with their spirits able again to take flight, their bodies could be in motion too. And

so they reversed course. They headed back to Jerusalem, to their comrades in the faith, the disciples, and the Church. They once again traveled the Way to which Jesus had called them.

That is the invitation Jesus issues to all of us tonight too. It is an invitation not only to experience the healing peace of Jesus, but to then recalibrate *our* journey, to turn, and to head back toward Christ and his Church, and to walk again the Way to which Jesus has called *us*. But this renewed journey is not just for our sake. As Isaiah one wrote, we are called to be “repairers of the breach.” That’s what Cleopas and his companion did. Back in Jerusalem, they shared their experience. They shared the timeless story of Jesus. They used the fire in *their* hearts to rekindle the hearts of *others*. The healed became the healers.

What was true for them is true for us as well. It is our blessed opportunity to share the story of Jesus with others, to invite our friends, family, and neighbors to hear Jesus’s ancient, steadfast promises, and to welcome them to a table – a table where eyes are opened and hearts are set afire. By God’s grace, may *our* healing – and the healing of the *world* – begin this night. Amen.