

Made Know to Us

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, April 19, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 24:13-35](#) (and [Luke 22:7-22](#))

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I love the Emmaus Road story. One of the things I love about it is how rich it is. I come back to this story regularly, both in my personal devotional life and in my capacity as a pastor and teacher. I've come back to the story so many times, I often think I've wrung everything I can out of it. And then I notice something new.

That happened to me this week. Before I tell you about that new thing, I'd like to do a little poll.

Start by thinking about your answer to this question: When do you feel closest to God? I want to give everyone time to come up with an answer. Now comes the polling part: Raise your hand (and Zoomers, you can raise your electronic hand or turn on your cameras and raise your physical hand) if you answer had anything to do with being in nature, if your answer was about stepping away from the built world and moving into the created world. As I suspected, more than half of you raised your hand.

Here's the new thing I noticed this past week: Cleopas and the unnamed disciple were outdoors, walking along the road, somewhere along the seven miles between Jerusalem and Emmaus, when Jesus showed up. I feel a little affirmation in the story about it being easier for me to feel the presences of God when I'm away from the built world and in the created world. I'm not saying that this is one of the central ideas of the story. I'm just saying that I love how this story keep offering up more and more.

One of biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan's more famous lines is, "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens."¹ What he meant is that this story in the 24th chapter of the gospel according to Luke is a parable. And parables, by definition, are not factual reports.

The parable of the Good Samaritan was not about a mugging that Jesus had witnessed the day before. The purpose of the Good Samaritan story is found in its meaning, not in factual events. It is a call to compassionate action. It is an invitation to think of other's vulnerabilities and needs at least as much as our own.

So, in today's sermon, we're going to dance with the story and, hopefully, find some of its meaning.

Earlier in chapter 24, Luke says that a group of women went to Jesus' tomb early on Easter morning. When they got there, it was empty. They returned to tell the male disciples that two angelic figures have proclaimed that Jesus is alive. The men dismiss what the

¹ John Dominic Crossan, "Story and Metaphor: An Expert from 'The Power of Parable,'" https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf200318a/john_dominic_crossan_story_and_metaphor_an_excerpt_from_the_power_of_parable (posted 18 May 2012; accessed 18 April 2026).

women tell them as nonsense – though Peter does go to the tomb to see for himself. No angels when he gets there, just the empty tomb.

It's later that day, and Jesus appears. "But not to Peter. Nor to Mary Magdalene. Nor to any of the others we've come to know over the course of the story. Moreover, Jesus doesn't appear at the tomb, or at the Temple, or on the Mount of Olives, or at Herod's palace or Pilate's headquarters or the house of the high priest. Jesus' post-crucifixion, alive-and-in-person appearance is, one would think, the highpoint of the story, the climax of the drama, the promised 'rising again on the third day' – and so we would expect it to happen in some central, important place, to some central, important people in the narrative. But we'd be wrong.

"... [Jesus appears] on a dusty road a couple of hours' walk outside of Jerusalem, on the way to some now-forgotten village (archeologists today don't know where "Emmaus" was located). And to whom [does Jesus appear]? Two followers of Jesus – one named "Cleopas" and the other left anonymous – who haven't even been mentioned yet in the story."²

I've long thought that Luke leaves one of the disciples unnamed on purpose. Maybe the unnamings implies that this disciple was a woman or a child. I think it's more likely that the second disciple is left unnamed because it could be you or me.

One commentary I read suggested that the location – outside the city, on the road to Podunkville – might be a purposeful reminder of how Luke began his story: "the grand announcement of the Messiah's birth is delivered to a few anonymous shepherds in the middle of nowhere. For Luke, the good news of the Gospel comes first of all not to insiders or the prestigious, but to ordinary folk in overlooked places. Just as he did when he was born, when Jesus rises and returns, he arrives from the outside in."³

Luke doesn't tell us why Cleopas and the unnamed disciple leave Jerusalem and go to Emmaus. Maybe their grief is too great to stay in Jerusalem. Maybe their fear motivates them to flee. Maybe they just gave up – "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" – and decided to go back to their old lives. Maybe they thought the story about the vision of angels was just too freaky and so they hit the road.

Whatever their reason, Jesus shows up, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Get out your red pens, English teachers, and write a note in the margin that Luke is using the passive voice. "their eyes were kept ..."

Almost every time I look at this scripture passage in a Bible study, someone asks, "Why couldn't they recognize him?" It's a good question. "These two disciples had walked with Jesus before, learned from Jesus before, spent the day with Jesus before, and yet their eyes were kept from recognizing him."⁴

² "Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3," *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/20/breaking-bread-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-3> (posted 13 April 2026; accessed 16 April 2026).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Eric D. Barreto, "A Table and a Promise," *Church Anew*, <https://churchanew.org/blog/posts/eric-barreto-a-table-and-a-promise> (posted 19 November 2024; accessed 16 April 2026). Punctuation corrected.

Luke doesn't help us know why or how they were kept from recognizing him. We must speculate. Eric Barreto did some good speculating: "Maybe Jesus looks a bit different after the resurrection. Perhaps the experience of the terrorism of the cross and the glorious resurrection of his body meant that he wasn't immediately recognizable. Maybe they just weren't ready to see Jesus again. Despite his promises to return, did the cross seem so definitive, so conclusive, so irretrievably deadly that they couldn't imagine that the executed Jesus would be standing before them? Did he look like he always did, but they simply were not expecting, at all, to see him? Were they so deep in grief and loss that they missed Jesus standing right in front of them? Or maybe, just maybe, was Jesus wearing a Zorro mask? Maybe he comically changed his accent to something ridiculous?"⁵

Only here's the thing. I don't think the *why* is important to Luke. I think what's important to Luke is the fact that Jesus was walking with them and talking with them and they didn't realize it. That sounds real to me. It is so easy to journey through our day and not realize that Jesus is journeying with us.

A friend and colleague shared one lesson from the story that's important to him: Every Emmaus Road we walk "is walked with a kindred spirit. There is someone to help us out of the ditch and point us in the right direction. We have a friend who celebrates the mountain top experiences, and empathizes with us in the valleys. If you find yourself in a season of darkness, remember, joy comes in the morning, at the rising of the sun through the mountain pass."⁶

In their conversation with Jesus, Cleopas is shocked that Jesus doesn't know about what has happened over the past week in Jerusalem. Assuming Jesus must be a "resident foreigner" (a more literal translation of the Greek than "stranger"), he explains, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him."

A commentary from Church Anew says that this description of Jesus may have been part of an early church creed.⁷ If that's right, Luke is putting the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus as he's talking and walking with them, right next to the fact that they know the right words to say about who Jesus was. As they walk, Jesus starts interpreting the Hebrew scriptures to them as pointing to his life, suffering, death, and resurrection. And even having the scriptures interpreted for them, they still don't recognize Jesus.

I think Luke is saying that seeing and recognizing Jesus in our midst isn't a head thing. It's a heart thing. It's a mutuality thing. We'll see this as the story concludes.

As they arrive in Emmaus, the sun is setting. It's going to be dark soon, and "the two disciples insist that this remarkable foreigner stay over with them before continuing on his journey. At supper, though he is their guest, not the host, Jesus takes bread, blesses it,

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John Macgiver Gage, in a Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/johnmacivergage/posts/pfbid02D5a3CDLTwH2dMux3B3xCvHPtGE8nPNXwiTFVoLCrM4Ci3Xb6yfkX48vfrmNs5uwXI> (posted and accessed 17 April 2026).

⁷ "Breaking Bread," *op. cit.*

[breaks it,] and gives it to them ... Then, and only then, they recognize him – and he vanishes from sight.”⁸

I don’t know if Luke is intentional about this, but by saying that Cleopas and the unnamed disciple recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread implies that they were at the Last Supper. And that means that Jesus shared that meal with more than just the 12 primary disciples.⁹

Luke may be wanting to signal something else. Up to this point in the story, Cleopas and the unnamed disciples have probably been filled with emotions that are primarily about themselves. Whether it was grief, fear, resignation, a general freak-out, or some combination that pushed them to leave Jerusalem for Emmaus, their emotional energy has been focused inward.

Something has shifted by the time they invite Jesus to stay with them in Emmaus. They are thinking about this stranger, this resident foreigner – about his safety, about his hunger, about his needs. They invite him to stay, and they sit down to dinner. And, as I said, even though he’s not the host, Jesus takes the bread. It is an act of mutual hospitality. That’s why in the sanctuary we’re going to pass each other the communion elements today, and if you’re online and with someone else, I encourage you to serve each other. Let this celebration of communion be an act of mutual hospitality.

I think this story is saying that the resurrected Jesus is made known to us if we keep our eyes – the eyes of our thoughts and the eyes of our hearts – open. We need to be looking in places we wouldn’t logically look to find him – because he may show up along some dusty road in the middle of nowhere. The risen Jesus may well appear in ways that defy or go beyond our preconceptions. The risen Jesus has a long history of showing up in the breaking of the bread. And, I think, we should be looking for the risen Jesus not so much in the form of a single figure, but rather in the liberating dance of love, where compassion and empathy are shared in community.

Jesus is made known to us in “a deeper form of life together: no longer dependent on his incarnate-in-a-single-figure presence ..., [Jesus is made known to us] in all kinds of ways, spiritually and tangibly present wherever bread is broken, wherever strangers are welcomed, wherever love is done, wherever captives are set free –and wherever ‘our hearts are burning within us’ along the Way.”¹⁰

Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cheryl A. Lindsay, “Weekly Seeds: ‘So I Send You’,” *Sermon Seeds*, <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/weekly-seeds-going-on/> (accessed 13 April 2026).

¹⁰ “Breaking Bread,” *op. cit.*