

## THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Homily by Bob Beutel

This is the story of a journey – several journeys.

Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of Christians, was on the road to the great city of Damascus when he was knocked off his high horse and struck blind . There is no horse in the Bible, but it sure helps us to feel the blow to Paul's arrogant ego.

The rest of us are on the road to a different town, the village of Emmaus

This is a story of following Jesus, the very human Jesus, the Jesus who grieved, who got angry, who was afraid, who called his disciples "fools", who was compassionate, who was joyful, who liked to go to parties. It's all in the Gospels.

This is a story, not theology. This is not a contest between "low Christology" and "high Christology". There are just many facets of Jesus, too many to encompass in one look.

In this story, I have chosen to follow the human Jesus because I think, first, that is what he wants of us.

Second, trying to emulate the divine Jesus leads to despair before we start. It's like trying to play golf against Tiger Woods or cooking better than your mother-in-law. You are doomed.

Third, the human Jesus is capable of emulation. He's saying, "if I can do it, you can do it, too." We must overcome the common mindset that Jesus was some kind of Superman, faster than a speeding bullet, capable of healing ten lepers at a single command, with talents far beyond those of ordinary mortals.

In fact, the human Jesus did great and wonderful things, not because he was God, but because he is human. His story is not that of being divine, but of becoming perfectly human.

Another mindset we need to overcome is that of apostle envy. We think, "how lucky were the apostles and others to have known the *real* Jesus. If I had been there, I could have been a real martyr type Christian, instead of the mediocre couch potato Christian I am now" But we forget, first, that the apostles could be real mediocre christians, themselves. One of them sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver; one of them denied knowing him 3 times; the others fell asleep when Jesus really, really needed their support in the Garden of Gethsemane. Some disciples!

Second, and most important for this story, is that Jesus is just as real and present to us as he was for the apostles. The historical Jesus was then, but the Jesus of the Resurrection is with us now.

What is the single common element about the Resurrection stories we have been reading since Easter-

in all of them, the apostles *did not recognize Jesus!* How could they, who had been with him daily, not recognize him? Let's go over the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus to solve this mystery. First of all, I will slightly paraphrase the story, because as we read it in its final form, there is a marginal note which puts the punch line first (bad literary technique) and which alters the true meaning. I have no authority, but I think that misplaced punch line is a later insertion to the text. 7 or 8 years of Joan of Arc Scripture Study has shown us that Luke is a great story teller – he's the one who gives us more parables than all the other writers combined. Luke doesn't mess up good story lines.

We have with us 3 members of Scripture Study to help us with this story.

Luke 24, slightly paraphrased, reads:

Now on that same day (the Sunday after Good Friday when Jesus was crucified) two of the disciples , Cleophas and Rachel, were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other

about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, a stranger came up and walked along with them. He asked them "What are you so intently discussing as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of the disciples asked him "Did you just get here? Haven't you heard about the events of the last few days?"

"What events?" the stranger asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth" they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us with strange news. They went to the tomb early this morning, but they didn't find his body."

He said to them, "Well, wait a minute. Don't you believe all that the prophets have spoken? Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures about the Christ.

As they approached their village, the stranger acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. It's getting cold and the road is not safe at night" So he went into their house to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave the traditional blessing of thanks, "Blessed are you, O Lord, Ruler of the Universe ..." broke the bread and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened! They got up and ran back at once to Jerusalem. On the way, they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

They found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together. Cleophas and Rachel told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

"We get it! We know what Jesus meant when he said 'I am with you always'! We know how he rose from the dead! He said 'When you do this to the least of my brethren you do it to me', feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, visiting the sick. That's when we see Jesus. We talked to this lonely man on the road, we invited him to take shelter with us, we offered him a meal. *He* is Jesus; all the hungry, lonely, sick people we encounter are Jesus. That's how Jesus came back from the dead. He is with us daily; we can't get away from him. He is with us always."

Back in Emmaus, the stranger swept the crumbs from the table and found a spare cot. "Blessed are you, O Lord, Ruler of the Universe, for inspiring such nice people to share their food and shelter with me. Thanks, too, for giving them such joy; I hope I can find out sometime what that was all about."

Thank you, Judith, Clarence, and Rik, for a great reading.

And so it is with us. We have Jesus with us daily, and we can't get away from him. Jesus is present right here, in the person on your right, in the person on your left. Some of you who have lived a long time with the person on your left or right are chuckling, but that's the point Jesus is making: "I am not with you as this perfect, unobtainable divine being; I am with you in every imperfect human form you can encounter." And this is why we, as very human, imperfect beings, can follow Jesus, can be Jesus to those who need Jesus as healer, as provider, as lover. Not only do we need to recognize Jesus in our neighbor, we need to recognize Jesus in ourselves. And doesn't this make it so much harder not to follow Jesus? We can't say, "I have no hope of ever being as perfect as Jesus, so I am going to

stay comfortable in my own mediocrity.” The challenge to us is to be as fully human as Jesus is; to be as brave as Jesus; to be as patient as Jesus; to be as loving as Jesus.

But we say, “I can’t do this by myself”. Well, Jesus doesn’t expect or want us to do it by ourselves; becoming as fully human as Jesus is a communal event. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am”, he says. He gives us each other, That’s what the mystery of the Resurrection is. We don’t need to walk into an inner city neighborhood at night all alone to serve the least of my brethren. We only need to look in the bulletin, the Joan of Arc website, the Shared Ministry form in the vestibule, to find the calls from Jesus to serve him, hand in hand and side by side with other Joanies, with the ones who have done it before and who can show us how to do it, with the ones whose hearts are burning and who will make our hearts burn, too. Like Jesus and his disciples in the Gospel reading we will hear a bit later today, we together can feed the hungry multitude out of our abundance. We can serve the hungry at St. Stephen’s shelter, we can visit the sick in Fr. Jim Cassidy’s Hospice program or at Grace House, we can shelter the homeless by rehabbing homes with the St Joan’s housing ministry. Call up Julie Madden at the ParishCenter – she’ll know which ministry of peace and justice or compassion you can fit into.

That’s what the mystery of the Eucharist is. It’s not “is Jesus really present in the bread of the eucharist?” It is “Is Jesus really present in the congregation at St. Joan of Arc? When the Eucharistic minister says “The Body of Christ”, our response should be “Yes, we are.” Then, when we leave here, Jesus is really present in each one of us as we walk out into the world of hunger, sickness, and loneliness.

Paradoxically, it is the human Jesus who is harder to believe in than the divine Jesus. It is harder because this belief carries with it a commitment to the “least of my brethren”. We can fake it with a belief in the divine Jesus, but a belief in the human Jesus demands, commands that we embrace “the least of my brethren” as the essential act of believing in Jesus. Sainthood is not optional; but sainthood does not require perfection, only humanity.

We are the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

We are the disciples who follow Jesus when we talk to the lonely, when we feed the hungry, shelter the homeless.

We have Jesus with us now, not in the distant memory of the past.

Our neighbor is Jesus to us,

We are Jesus to our neighbor.

Jesus has risen from the dead! Jesus is alive! Jesus walks among us. We don’t need to wait for the Second Coming. Jesus cannot be any more present to us than he is right now.

He wants us to hold his hand, to embrace him, to talk to him, to share our food with him, to share our homes with him.

Let’s do it.

Amen