

How did you get here? What special road brought you to this place (or your workplace, or grocer or hairstylist, for that matter)? Another way of asking the question might be: "What road do you live on?" Roads carry a particular importance for us. Whether we consider a wide expansive freeway, the perpetually gridlocked Spaghetti Junction, or a meandering country way, we all recognize the prominent role that roads play in our lives. Roads carry us from our homes to our places of work, learning, shopping, recreation, and worship. They connect us to life beyond our walls. And even sometimes life happens on the road itself.

In a similar way roads dominate the biblical narrative. From the expulsion from Eden in Genesis to the arrival of the heavenly nations streaming into the New Jerusalem in John's Revelation, the people of God have been on the move. In a real sense the Bible portrays one long journey following a path of faith. This route went through the Red Sea into the wilderness, and from the wilderness into a land of promise. This path led to the glorious Temple in Jerusalem. This same road led God's people into apostasy and exile in Babylon. This path eventually led them back to the land of their ancestors. As Christians we pick up this road when we meet Joseph and Mary riding into Bethlehem to give birth to our Lord. We follow Jesus on his road, always moving with patient determination, on his way into Jerusalem. And we walk with him in his last hours of his life to the place of his death, the place of the Skull. Many would agree that this last road, the Via Dolorosa – literally "the way of suffering or pain," the Way of the Cross, is the most important of all paths. One well might argue that of equal importance is the biblical road we encounter in today's Gospel reading. The Road to Emmaus is the way after the cross.

Here we encounter two of Jesus' disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed follower. Dejected, eyes cast downward, they are leaving Jerusalem, and returning to Emmaus. As disciples of Jesus they must have approached Jerusalem with tremendous anticipation and hope. But now, their hope remained in Jerusalem, nailed to a tree. Hope resides in their rearview mirror. Jerusalem is behind them. Uncertainty, resignation, and fear lay ahead.

And then the risen Christ approaches them, coming up from behind, just another pilgrim on the road returning home after the Passover. We are told that they did not recognize Jesus – literally, their eyes were "seized" – and is it any wonder? Who would have expected such a thing? Jesus was dead. He was behind them. When Jesus engages them in conversation, sharing words, we find out a little more about these particular disciples. We discover that they had heard of the women's account at the tomb that very same morning. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and some other women found that Jesus' body was gone, and they had a vision of angels. The body was gone. The tomb was empty. But they were merely astounded. Clearly this was not enough for Cleopas and his companion. Just look where they are. They are on the road. Jerusalem lay behind them.

Now it seems that being resurrected did nothing to alter Christ's impatience with faithlessness. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" he says to the two disciples. How their ears must have burned! But he doesn't abandon them. In fact Jesus does just the opposite. He walks with them the rest of the way to Emmaus, interpreting for them how "this Jesus" was the fulfillment of all that the Scriptures had foretold. Yet these followers still don't get it. They are walking with Jesus, they hear from his mouth the truth of the Word about him, and they still don't see him. Only after they get to their destination, their journey from Jerusalem complete, do they come to perceive that their companion on the road is indeed the resurrected Christ. When Jesus becomes revealed to them in the breaking of the bread, Cleopas and his friend get up immediately and hit the road again.

This time they are going toward Jerusalem. They have good news to proclaim: “The Lord is risen indeed!”

Now the authors of the New Testament used the Greek word for road – “hodos” – in a variety of ways. When the Gospel writers spoke of roads or ways, there were layers to the meaning. “Hodos” can simply mean a road. It can also mean the way one conducts one’s life. “Hodos” can mean discipleship, to speak in the language of the early Church. Here the road is bidirectional. This is not an image of an ethical path that repeatedly forks or divides, but rather one long continuous way. One can either follow the road toward God, or follow the road away from God. This is a carryover from the Hebrew understanding. For example in the psalms we find that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” In Isaiah we hear the words: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,” a task undertaken by John in his ministry of baptism. In the New Testament Jesus speaks of the narrow gate. “The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction...but [changing directions] the gate is narrow and road is hard that leads to life.” Jesus is speaking of his road, his way that leads through death into eternal life. But John’s gospel spells out this meaning for “hodos” most clearly and expansively. When his disciples – represented by Thomas – complain that they do not know where they are to go, and do not know the way, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Jesus is more than the leader or the trailblazer. He is the road itself to life with God.

So when we read the account of the road to Emmaus there are layers to the meaning. First and foremost we have a literal account of two disciples’ encounter with the risen Christ. But here we also have the Road to Emmaus as the way of covenant relationship – of discipleship. These two followers of Jesus had turned away from him. They hoped for a Messiah that would not end up dead on a cross. When they had been told that the Lord was alive, they did not believe, and they took the road away from Jerusalem and the risen Christ. Yet Jesus sought them out, and found them. In burning blindness they could not see Christ. But he opened their minds with the Word, and touched a match to their hearts. And that still was not enough. They continued on away from Jerusalem. Yet Jesus remained. Only after he abided with them, breaking and sharing himself, did Cleopas and his companion become aware. They were changed. Their eyes were opened, and they could see that they were set on fire. They turned back – no they ran back – to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news.

This road to Emmaus is discipleship as the way after the cross. This road is hard. We walk along a path, and often the goal is not clear. Sometimes we encounter terrible loss, as Cleopas and his friend had. We lose someone we love dearly. We become estranged from a family member or a friend. We lose our health. We lose a job when we need it the most. We see our hope crucified. And we just have to sit down in the road. The dust of life burns our eyes so that we cannot see if we are walking toward Jerusalem, or away from Jerusalem, or even if we are moving at all. We just feel like giving up. And if that is all there is to this road, then we would be left with despair. But we are not alone. A stranger who is no stranger engages us, and lifts us up with words. He sets our hearts on fire, and we feel the pulse of new life surge in us. Our Savior feeds us with his very essence, which is life itself. Being a disciple means receiving God’s grace, a truth that too often we overlook, or feel unworthy to receive. But as fellow travelers of the way after the cross we are intended to be made anew, refreshed, so full of the love that lifted us up that this love pours forth from us in proclamation and deed.

But that is only part of discipleship, this way after the cross. We are not to remain in some upper room, congratulating ourselves on seeing the risen Christ. The way after the cross is

life on the road. As fellow travelers on the way after the cross we are always moving toward Jerusalem. We are intended to walk together, sharing word, and bread, and wine, Body, and Blood. On the road we are to look for any among us – and especially those beyond us – who sit lost in life's burning dust. We are to speak God's word to them. We are to share Christ's love with them in the breaking of the bread. We are to become a road ourselves, leading ourselves and others to the One who is the Way, the "Hodos," the Truth, the Life.