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Emmaus - The Artist's Way¹

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Nobody knows exactly where the biblical village of Emmaus was located. This is particularly frustrating, since the distance from Jerusalem is so clearly indicated in Luke's Gospel: 60 Greek stadia, or seven and a half miles away from the city. No fewer than four modern towns have been suggested; the oldest one, mentioned in the late first century, is, however, only four miles away; the one which actually has the "warm wells", which is what the name Emmaus means, is 20 miles away, too far to walk back and forth on one evening. The village which is actually seven miles north-west from Jerusalem, also on a Roman road, was only mentioned in the 11th century by Crusaders as the Roman Castellum Emmaus.²

Perhaps it is a great irony that we cannot easily locate Emmaus. Perhaps there is another way to get there, not the scholar's way, but the artist's way. Surely, nobody will ever experience again how it really was way back then. Nobody can slip into the skin of these two lonely disciples that evening. We cannot possibly live their lives again, share their life styles, or turn the time machine back to the first century. The sceptic in us simply states, "I was not there, I cannot have an opinion", to paraphrase a character in the Third Man.³ The Third Man in the Emmaus story, however, is quite a different matter.

During the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus, it was suggested to strip the biblical text of all its miracles in order to allow the true historical record to emerge. But what would the New Testament be without the miracle of the Resurrection? What would be left of the Emmaus story which is the second most significant miracle of Easter Sunday? All that would be left would be an insignificant walk to an insignificant village, not worthy to be recorded.

Perhaps the distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus has to be measured differently than in miles. Perhaps there is another map,

another geography, that of the heart and soul. On these inner journeys, the distance is that between the so-called two sides of the brain, or the distance from the intellect to the intuition, from the two observing eyes to the third eye of insight. For some of us, this distance takes years to cross, while for others, children and artists among them, this distance is only a heartbeat away. In the twinkling of an eye, one can travel across continents and centuries. This will not be historical truth. The critical mind will dismiss it as fantasy and illusion. But the artist will find more than a reconstruction - intensified life.

As the author of the book, *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron has stated, "art is an act of tuning in", and is like diving into a deep well. "It is as though all the stories, painting, music, performances in the world live just under the surface of our normal consciousness. Like an underground river, they flow through us as a stream of ideas we can tap down into."⁴

Critical academic training and intellectualism can become a deadly enemy of the creative spirit. But even Albert Einstein claimed that "imagination is more important than knowledge", and it was Einstein again who said that "the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious."⁵ Once we forget the truth that all life is rooted in mystery, we lose an essential part of our humanity.

According to Julia Cameron, "The Artist's Way is a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage home to the self. Like all great journeys it entails dangers of the trail...Like all pilgrims, those of us on the Artist's Way will often be graced by fellow travellers and invisible companions...As artists, we belong to an ancient and holy tribe. We are the carriers of the truth that spirit moves through us all."⁶

Scholars agree that Emmaus must have been somewhere West of Jerusalem. Artists, such as William Blake, agree that indeed one has to turn West in order to journey to that encounter, into the direction of the setting sun, willing to face the darkness. Visual artists have portrayed the Emmaus story since the ninth century in manuscripts and architectural stone carvings, usually showing three men walking close together along a road.

Duerer, a friend of Luther, concentrated on the gathering around the holy meal, a theme influenced by Leonardo's famous mural of

the Last Supper; in the German artist's interpretation this became a more focused, intimate kind of communion. Rembrandt, who portrayed the Emmaus story at least seven times at different stages of his life, dared to weave the market and ghetto scenes of his contemporary Amsterdam into biblical events. Surely, his images are not historically correct, but there emerges another truth. Observed reality gives life to his images, so that miracles can happen in front of our eyes. He even used the contemporary fascination with gunpowder and explosions to stage the drama of the sudden disclosure and disappearance of Jesus to the utter shock of the disciples at Emmaus. But his later portrayals of this event have moved from literally explosive interpretations to those of silent meditations of a divine mystery.

Taking courage from the examples of these artists, I will try to paint you my own picture of Emmaus with words instead of pen and brushstrokes. Into my picture have also entered other artists such as Edvard Munch and his image of the Scream, which has become a cultural icon of our century; there are also traces of the Passion text and music of Bach, the Three Tenors' ecstatic love songs, and the people and impressions I gathered on my own inner and outer journeys. You can call this a collage. My image is seen only through a glass darkly, but I ask your permission and patience to travel with me to Emmaus...

It was good to leave the city behind. It was early spring, and some birds were singing in the late afternoon. A gentle breeze pushed us onward. There had been such a glorious sunrise this morning, but now clouds had moved in, and the sun had disappeared.

Life had become too confusing and too dangerous in the city. We were glad to pass the Roman soldiers at the gate without being noticed. At this time of day, not many people were on the road, and we could reach the village before it got dark.

I had not been able to eat in two days; I felt exhausted and my head was spinning. One good thing about the Romans was that they had built even this smaller road with smooth stone blocks, but we still had to watch our steps. It was only a two hour walk to Emmaus, but today the road seemed to be endless.

Joining the group in Jerusalem had begun so joyfully. I had heard that the famous Rabbi was a healer, and I had taken my best

friend to see him. Kleopas had a sore which had never properly healed; he never complained, but I just saw the pain in his face. One day the group passed by and we followed them. We waited until evening, when the crowd had finally left. I had it all rehearsed, and my heart was beating with excitement and anticipation: "This is Kleopas my friend who has..."

But it all came differently. The twelve had already gathered for the evening meal when we came through the door. Somebody waved us to join them. We sat so close to the Master that we did not dare to look into his face. Rather, we watched his hands as he held the bread. His hands were strong like those of a craftsman, but they were also delicate and almost fragile. He lifted the bread as if it were a most precious gift, and he cupped his hands around it as if he would hold a small living being. Then he blessed it and broke it slowly, as if he would break a part of himself, and I felt pain sweeping through my heart. With his gesture, rather than with words, he suggested that with this bread he was giving himself to each one of us.

I stumbled outside. I had totally forgotten about Kleopas, but here he was at my side, and the glow on his face told me that he was well. Ever since that evening, we went to hear the Master every day, and we became part of his company. There was so much joy in that group, so much anticipation, so much excitement. He had talked about the Kingdom of the Messiah, and we believed he was talking about himself.

But then came that horrible day when he died. We were so sure that God would deliver him that we did not panic until he uttered that terrible cry. The sun was setting and the clouds were turning blood red. There was a scream passing through nature which filled the whole sky like red blood, and it seemed that all of nature was screaming.⁷ I put my hands on my ears and ran and ran, until I collapsed in a narrow alley. Somebody found me, and somebody carried me back. Kleopas was there, and tried to comfort me. But I could not stop shaking. I was standing at a black abyss, and I feared to fall into it. God had abandoned our beloved Teacher. He was such a holy man and died such a horrible death. Nothing made sense any more.

It was Kleopas' idea to leave the city. He was concerned about me. He had tried to feed me, but I could not bear the sight of broken bread. I saw the Master's hands dripping with blood; the bread was

bleeding! Kleopas became alarmed. "Let's go home," he finally said. Home! I had no home. I had left my home when I joined the company. I was not even sure Kleopas had any relatives at Emmaus. We did not take much along, and we did not want to say farewell to the eleven and all the others. We could not bear their restless confusion since the morning. Now, there was not even a grave left, no memorial, no place to gather to remember the Master.

It was good to leave the city behind. I could breathe deeply for the first time in days. The wind was gently pushing us forward, and we finally started to talk, to share our feelings about the Master, our hopes, our fears, our disappointment. Suddenly, somebody stepped up behind us. It was as if he had stepped out of the wind. "Fear not," he said. He was a pilgrim, a Rabbi, we thought; nobody knew the Law and the Prophets like him. But how strange...

He challenged us so intensely that we finally stopped in the middle of the road. My head was spinning and burning, and my lips were dry. Finally, I dared to look at the stranger, but a hood covered his head, and the wind blew his hair over his face. The stranger moved on as if he were walking on moss, as if there was not a single stumbling block in all of Judea, as if he forgot all about us. He seemed to walk right into the setting sun, leaving us behind in the darkness, totally confused and exhausted.

We called out to him not to leave us alone. We begged him to stay with us. At first we were not sure he heard us. But then he quietly followed us. Nobody talked until we reached the house and gathered for the meal. I found myself sitting right next to him, and watched his hands. They were strong, and yet delicate. And he took up the bread as if it were the most precious gift on earth, and he broke it...

Kleopas jumped up so suddenly that his chair was knocked over, and he fell down on his knees. I could not move. My eyes started to blur so that I could only see rays of light shooting from what seemed to be a bright star in front of me. The light was so strong that the glow and warmth filled my whole body. A psalm of blessing swept through me, a hymn of thanksgiving roared through my entire being like a mighty waterfall, filling the whole room, pouring into the evening sky outside, reaching the heavens. Huge waves of music swept over me like a river of exultation. Kleopas finally grabbed my shoulder,

and we ran back to the city.

It was night when we entered the house. The eleven were huddled together, some already sleeping, when we burst through the door. Thomas blocked me. "Why did you not bring him along? All you can do is run." A deep compassion filled me. I realized how angry he was. First in the morning, it was Mary Magdalene who had caused such commotion. And now, at night, I come to disturb them, and I am not even Kleopas' wife! It was not fair: Thomas had been with the Master for three years, and I only for less than three weeks. "You will see him too, Thomas," I said gently, "I know it. He will meet you also." The eleven stared at me. "You will all meet him," I heard myself say with a confidence which surprised me. "All who love him will meet him. You will see...."

Many years have passed. I have travelled to a foreign land where I could not speak the language. For several days, I did not talk, but in my silence I started to speak to the Master. Sometimes, there was his deep silence instead of an answer, but at other times his words bounced back so quickly that I was taken by surprise. At other times, I felt his smile gently resting on my shoulder when my question was childish or when I realized that the question already contained the answer. In the evening in the inn, when the table was set just for me alone, I felt like laughing: they do not realize that I am not alone!

Yes, I would like to set my table always with one additional plate, but most people would not understand that. After all these years, I tend to forget that bread is never the same again since the Master shared it. And often I do not invite the stranger I met on the road, and I begin to be afraid again of people I do not know. I forget that some of the dearest people I know were strangers at one time. Sometimes, around the warmth of a supper table, I get a glimpse of the Master, in the eyes of love and understanding, in the smile of delight, in the hands which reach out, and in celebration.

As I get older, my prayer is more often, "Lord do not leave us, because it is getting dark, and the day is ending. Please abide with us." I have to remember and to believe that he always hears and graciously stays when we enter the darkness.

It was at Emmaus where our deepest questions were asked. But

this was not at all about getting answers. We could so easily have missed it—missed him. There is more than questions, more than answers. Words are only good for the road, not for the inn. There, at Emmaus, at the “warm wells”, something else happened: we experienced the abundance of living water welling up inside. Finally, it is all about presence—silence sounding with adoration.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon, delivered at Rockway Mennonite Church in Kitchener, was written in memory of Clarence Bauman, Professor at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.
- ² *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press 1962) vol. 2, 97-98.
- ³ *The Third Man* is a film by Carol Reed and David Selznick, based on a novel by Graham Greene and featuring Orson Welles, which has been called the greatest British thriller of the post-war era, playing in the streets and ruins of occupied Vienna during the late 1940s.
- ⁴ Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York: Putnam 1992) 118.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 131 and 195.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* 303 and 205.
- ⁷ Robert Rosenblum, *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1978) 38-39. Munch's painting of 1893 called *The Scream* is a “powerful expression of the anxiety-ridden existence of modern man.” Munch described this image with the following words: “I walked one evening on a road...the sun was setting, the clouds were coloured red—like blood. I felt as though a scream went through nature—I thought I heard a scream.”