

## **COME, LORD JESUS, BE OUR GUEST**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Our kids grew up saying, “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. By his hands we all are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen” at the dinner-table. If they were really hungry, we heard just “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Amen.” Jackson and Natalie still say that blessing whenever we are fortunate enough to sit around the table together.

I grew up hearing my dad say, “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty; through Christ our Lord. Amen.” I’m not sure why my dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterian father used this traditional Roman Catholic grace before every meal. Maybe it’s because he was born and raised in New Orleans. Anyway, that’s the blessing I use to this day.

My family doesn’t use this particular grace before meals, but I’ve heard it plenty of times over the years in different settings:

*Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest  
And let these gifts to us be blest. Amen.*

That short prayer can be traced back to a Moravian hymnal published in London in 1753. However, a Missouri Synod Lutheran hymnal says the prayer was originally included in some evangelical hymns from the 17th century. The popular prayer soon spread across denominational lines and is still used by the faithful in many different traditions.

In his blog about “Come, Lord Jesus, Be Our Guest,” Chris Gehrz writes about growing up with this mealtime blessing. He asks, “So what’s so important about these fifteen words?” Here are his reflections:

\* The prayer reminds us that Christian faith is not purely intellectual or other-worldly; it is incarnate, inseparable from the body’s physical needs.

\* The prayer reminds us that Christian faith is not individualistic; it is inseparable from our relationships, with Jesus and with his other followers. It helps us remember that we know Jesus Christ not only by personal decision but because our parents and their parents and generations more knew him first.”

\* The prayer underscores that Jesus, even before the Second Coming, is a very present Lord: the unseen guest at every meal.

\* The prayer focuses upon Christ’s presence (asking him to come into every part of our lives) and acknowledges Christ’s gifts (especially the simple, sustaining gifts of food, drink, shelter, and the loving presence of other people).<sup>1</sup>

Luke's story about the walk to Emmaus is one of the most intriguing and poignant stories in the gospels. Cleopas and his companion aren't out for a pleasant Sunday afternoon stroll, enjoying the spring weather and the beauty of an Easter afternoon. Quite the opposite — although Luke doesn't specifically say they were walking slowly back to Emmaus, he certainly hints at a slow, mournful pace — “they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened . . . they stood still, looking sad.” Cleopas and his friend accurately told the story of what had happened, including the women saying Jesus was alive, but it wasn't real to them. In what is surely one of the saddest, most hopeless verses in the Bible, they pour out their crushed hopes and dead dreams to this stranger on the road, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” There on the road to Emmaus, it all seemed hopeless.

It's interesting that archaeologists and biblical scholars have never been able to locate the town of Emmaus. Luke tells us it was about seven miles from Jerusalem. When I looked for Emmaus on the map in the back of my study Bible, I found it just northwest of Jerusalem, but the town name was followed by (?). Maybe that's just as well. Frederick Buechner calls Emmaus “the place that we go to in order to escape.” He writes, “the place where he comes is very apt to be Emmaus, which is the place where we spend much of our lives, you and I, the place that we go to in order to escape . . . But there are some things that even in Emmaus we cannot escape . . . We can escape [the job we didn't get, the friend we hurt, the awful suspicion that life doesn't make any sense, maybe even the questions we have about the Jesus religion] . . . But the one thing that we cannot escape is life itself . . . [getting hungry and eating, walking or driving a long dusty road to get from one place to another] . . . And my point is this, that it is precisely at such times as these that life is going to ask us questions that we cannot escape for long: questions about where the road we are traveling is finally going to take us; about whether food is enough to keep us alive, truly alive; about who we are and who the stranger is behind us.”<sup>2</sup>

Emmaus offers the same old routine for Cleopas and his companion, maybe now tinged with sadness and despair and shattered dreams . . . “We had hoped . . .” And yet, where else can they go? What else can they do? In the aftermath of everything that happened in Jerusalem on Friday and Saturday, they probably figured they had no other options than to walk back to Emmaus.

Some of you may be familiar with the program called “Walk to Emmaus.” It developed in the United Methodist Church and is a 72-hour retreat experience for Christians to deepen their faith and their walk with Jesus. Obviously, the program takes its name from Luke's story. According to the website, “Like Christians and churches who are blinded by preoccupation with their own immediate difficulties, these two disciples' sadness and hopelessness seemed to prevent them from seeing God's redemptive purpose in things that had happened. And yet, the risen Christ ‘came near and went with them,’ opening the disciples' eyes to his presence and lighting the fire of God's love in their hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

Why is life, the true life, so hard to see, here and now? Luke tells us “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” The two men in dazzling clothes in the empty tomb

asked the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The stuff of life gets in the way of seeing the true life that Jesus offers us, here and now. Despite our Easter celebration of just two weeks ago, the harsh realities of our everyday lives can keep us from recognizing the risen Lord Jesus in our midst. One writer has said, “Life, here and now, is very hard to see. In the end, I think being resurrection people takes some effort, in fact, a lot of effort. And some weeks will demand more effort than others. Jesus knows this reality, our reality. And knows that we need a reminder. In fact, we probably need a lot of them, daily perhaps.”<sup>4</sup>

Cleopas and his companion needed a reminder, and they got it in the form of Bible study and broken bread. The two can’t be separated in this story. Even after the “stranger” interpreted the scriptures to them, their eyes were still closed to Jesus. But, after he “took, blessed, broke, and gave” the bread to them, they recognized Jesus. St. Augustine said, “The teacher was walking with them along the way and he himself was the way . . . and because they observed hospitality, him who they knew not yet in the expounding of scriptures, they suddenly know in the breaking of bread.”

What do you do when your eyes are opened to the risen Lord Jesus Christ? To their credit, Cleopas and his companion didn’t keep it to themselves. They didn’t stay at the table in the house in Emmaus and congratulate themselves on their spiritual experience. Luke doesn’t say it, but I’ve always imagined that they ran all the way back to Jerusalem to share the good news. Again, to their credit, they don’t resent the eleven disciples stealing their thunder by sharing their news first — “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Instead, Cleopas and friend join their witness and experience with that of the disciples and share in the community.

Look at what happens in this story:

\* Two of them were walking along the road and Jesus showed up. (“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”)

\* They heard God’s Word. (“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”)

\* They broke bread together. (“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”)

\* They went out and took the Word with them. (“Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”)

Friends, it’s a worship service! It’s what we do right here in this sanctuary! When we gather in Jesus’ name, hear God’s Word, break bread together, and go out to share God’s love, we can recognize our risen Lord, even and especially in the midst of the stuff of life! The great preacher and teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock, said, “The longest journey any of us will ever make is between our head and our heart.” Maybe that journey from head to heart is like the walk on the road to Emmaus for many of us. We wonder, we struggle, we question . . . and Jesus shows up to walk along beside us. In the opened Word, in the broken bread, in the fellowship of God’s people, if we look with our hearts, we can see and recognize Jesus, who is the way and the life.

In our bulletin this morning, there is a picture of a painting by Caravaggio of *Supper at Emmaus*. Please take a look at it.



As you think about your own road to Emmaus, listen to how one art historian describes the impact of the painting:

“At the center is this beardless, tranquil stranger whose hand raised in benediction almost reaches out beyond the canvas to the viewer. The two disciples react so differently to their sudden awareness — the one on the right with his outstretched arms seems ready to embrace Christ. The disciple on the left stares at Christ’s face and is ready to spring from his chair in astonishment and joy. Meanwhile the puzzled innkeeper can’t understand what’s going on. The disciples’ excited gestures are those of everyday people.”<sup>5</sup> As another observer notes, “The viewer too is made to feel a participant in the event.”

Maybe that’s why we don’t know the name of Cleopas’ companion on the road to Emmaus. Maybe Luke is inviting us to be a participant in the event and to ask ourselves, How do we recognize the risen Jesus in our midst? What if we really believed Jesus is alive and present with us? More than that, what if we really lived and acted as if Jesus is alive and present with us, especially in the midst of the stuff of life that can far too often close our eyes to Jesus’ real presence among us?

How do we recognize Jesus among us? It’s not as if we have to conjure him up or hope that he will show up every now and then. Because he is alive, Jesus walks with us everywhere we go and in everything we do. We meet Jesus when we hear God’s Word and when we break the bread here in this place. But we also meet Jesus out on the road. And, as Buechner said, life will ask us “questions about where the road we are

traveling is finally going to take us; about whether food is enough to keep us alive, truly alive; about who we are and who the stranger is behind us.”

Chris Gehrz writes about the other mealtime prayer that his mom’s side of the family used at the table (also Moravian). Along with “Come, Lord Jesus, Be Our Guest,” it sums up this walk to Emmaus story pretty well for your life and mine:

*Be present at our table, Lord  
Be here and everywhere adored  
These mercies bless and grant that we  
May strengthened for thy service be.<sup>6</sup>*

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us, too, we pray, in every part of our journey, no matter how full of doubt or fear we may be today. Through your Holy Spirit, we pray that you will open our eyes, too. Help us see you as our risen Lord in all your beauty and in all your loving power. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Chris Gehrz, “Come, Lord Jesus, Be Our Guest,” at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Buechner, “The Road to Emmaus,” in *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 86-87.

<sup>3</sup>“What is the meaning behind the name ‘Walk to Emmaus’?” at [www.emmaus.upperroom.org](http://www.emmaus.upperroom.org).

<sup>4</sup>Karoline Lewis, “Resurrection Witnesses,” Sunday, April 12, 2015 at [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com).

<sup>5</sup>Eliot McCue, “John Eliot Gardner conducts an art tour,” at [www.boulderbachbeat.org](http://www.boulderbachbeat.org).

<sup>6</sup>Chris Gehrz.