

## **THE BLESSEDNESS OF BROKENNESS**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 13, 2008

Scripture: I Peter 2:19-25; Luke 24:13-35

I have been on that road, the Emmaus road, or at least I think I have. Twelve years ago... seems like yesterday. I was on that road. It's an old Palestinian road, dating from the time of Jesus. Josephus, the great historian of the First Century mentions a Roman army base there near the town of Mozza, perhaps Emmaus, about the end of that first century Common Era.

Today there are still some remnants of that Palestinian village of Mozza, which ceased to be Palestinian in 1948 when Israel was created as a state. Now it's a suburb of Jerusalem, part of the Jerusalem corridor that leads from Tel Aviv into Western Jerusalem. So in modern parlance, it's on the West Bank.

Just behind the remains of the village of Mozza are the remnants of a Roman road, probably the one in our story this morning, the road to Emmaus that Cleopas and his fellow traveler took.

Even today you can see the beautiful terraces with the watch towers that are referenced in Isaiah, Chapter 5. Think of grape vines growing along the terraces, and olive trees planted in long rows.

There is a town today called Imwas along that road. And it's sometimes suggested that Imwas was the Biblical Emmaus, but nobody knows for sure. It's an approximation really, a geological, archaeological, historical construct for all intents and purposes because as any reputable biblical scholar will acknowledge nobody really knows where Emmaus was, not really.

Even Luke who is notoriously bad at place locations and who failed fifth grade geography, may have guessed at the distance from Jerusalem to this so-called Emmaus. One of the ancient and reliable texts says that it was sixty stadia from Jerusalem. But another text of equal reliability says that it was a hundred and sixty stadia from Jerusalem. So the Biblical archaeologists, not to mention the textual scholars, cannot seem to plot this elusive Emmaus on the map.

Oh well, it doesn't really matter. It's not as if it doesn't exist. As if it's a made up story. We've all been there at one time or another on that road. I know I've been there on that road, if at no other time twelve years ago, looking up the old Roman path with the terraces and the olive trees and the grape vines on either side.

Long, long ago; about sunset on Easter eve there were two others walking on that road. Cleopas and a fellow traveler making their way with painful steps and slow back to Emmaus, where they hoped to escape their sense of sadness and grief, the terrible feeling you have when the future you thought you had, you no longer have, and even the present seems pretty shaky.

They were no doubt bent over by the sadness that weighed about their shoulders like some heavy cape, wrapping and covering them. They did and looked like anybody

who has been to the cemetery does, reliving all the recent events that had taken them there.

I remember one night being called to the hospital. There had been an accident. One of the kids in the congregation had been out for the evening and someone who was drunk hit her on the driver's side and mangled the car so badly that it wrapped around a tree from the force of it all, and she was killed. I stood there with her parents when the doctor told them that there was nothing that they could do. "Nothing we can do," they said. Their daughter was gone.

You cry at a time like that. Everyone cries at a time like that, standing there at the intersection of what is and what might have been. You think about the day that that child was born, and her first word, her first step, and her first day at school, her art work on the refrigerator door. Her dancing lessons, her questions about everything (as the world opened up before her and she reintroduced you to the wonder of learning things again for the first time). You remember teaching her how to drive, and arguing with her about how much she was using her cell phone, and disapproving of that boy that she was dating for about four months until she saw what it was that you saw from the get-go that was wrong about him, but that she had to discover for herself because that's the way it works. You think about your plans for her, and what she wanted to be and do and where she wanted to go, and you could just see her five, ten years into the future. And it all slips away.

You go over it and over it and over it in your mind, until it's all you think about.

Well that's the kind of thing Cleopas and the other traveler were thinking about standing there on the road at the intersection of what is and what might have been. They were locked in memories, memories of what they had seen and known in Jesus, what promise he had demonstrated, what happiness they felt in his presence, what hopes they held for him as messiah. This, at last, was the one for whom they had longed.

But their hopes were dashed by his sudden betrayal and arrest, the trumped up charges that were brought against him, the scourging and death that he suffered under Roman justice, and the disconcerting rumors of the empty tomb and confusing reports of his appearance among the disciples.

They left Jerusalem along the Emmaus road just wanting to get away from the confusion and distraction, the sadness and weariness of spirit that they felt in the city where all this had taken place.

The road to Emmaus for them was the quiet escape of time spent walking the road, lost in thought, asking questions of each other, checking out their perceptions of what they had seen and heard, reliving their experiences.

With all of that happening, a stranger comes to them, and asks them what they are talking about. What is it that so absorbs them?

They seem astounded that he has not heard anything about what is to them the most important thing that has happened in their lives. "Who are you, Sleeping Beauty, that you don't know the score about what has been happening in Jerusalem in the last few days?" It's Jesus that they're talking to, but they don't realize it at first. So they tell him everything that has happened to him. (Note to self: don't ever tell Jesus what he already knows.)

Jesus snaps back at them that they don't understand their bible, and they must be pretty dense. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe," he says. And then he explains to them the meaning of the scriptures that say that the Messiah should suffer and enter into his glory. And beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus gives the first Sunday school lesson of all time explaining the meaning of the scriptures regarding himself.

When they got to the village where they were going (and Luke doesn't even say that it was Emmaus, just *the town where they were going*) Cleopas and the other disciple ask Jesus to stay with them, break bread with them, rest awhile. And he does.

When they go to the table and he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened and they realize that it is their risen Lord who is with them, and had been all along. And no sooner did that dawn on them than he was gone. So they rushed back to Jerusalem and told the disciples what they had seen and heard.

They had left Jerusalem and taken the Emmaus road in order to get away from the brokenness of their lives, the sorrow that hung around them like a weight about their shoulders. And there, at the table, in the presence of the Living One the sorrow was lifted as they realized that in life and death he had met them on their way. They might have given up on him, but he would never give up on them.

I've been on that road, that road to Emmaus. Haven't you?

It was Frederick Buechner who was the first I can remember to ever pick up on the awkwardness of trying to locate Emmaus and the road that takes us there.

Here... are two men walking along a dusty road to a town that nobody heard of much... [writes Buechner] Emmaus... the place where we go in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, "Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway."<sup>1</sup>

Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [humanity has...] have always in the end been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life.<sup>2</sup>

I've been on that road. The road of disappointment. The road of judgment reached too early. The road of broken dreams, at the intersection of what is and what might have been. You've been there, too, haven't you, though the time and location may not have been that ancient Roman road on the West Bank leading out of town?

Barbara Brown Taylor says,

It is the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate defeated, your loved one has died – the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again.<sup>3</sup>

It's sorting through what's left, and deciding what you can take with you, once you have enough strength to figure out whether you want to go on at all.

In an awkward season like this it is watching your retirement income dwindle, and your mortgage exceed the value of your house, it's watching your job vanish in a troubled economy, or bearing with a long term illness that casts a different shadow on the future than the sunlight you have always expected.

The irony of the road to Emmaus is that while it may be the road where we stand with our broken dreams, it is also the road on which our risen Lord comes to us, this God who never gives up on us, this one who will not leave us comfortless.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way,

The blindness of the two disciples does not keep their Christ from coming to them. He does not limit his post-resurrection appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the disconsolate. He comes to those who do not know their Bible, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and headed back home, which makes this whole story a story about the blessedness of brokenness.<sup>4</sup>

Somewhere along the way when I was a teenager, I discovered the immutable truth that in life we do not learn as much from our successes as we do from our failures.

Everyone likes success, but sometimes the truly formative and important mold into which the hot and molten metal of our lives is poured is the only way our character can be forged. This a truth every coach knows, every business person, everyone who has ever fought for an important cause, anyone who has ever loved and lost. It is not always the victories we attain that teach us the most, but the losses that mold our character.

I saw our neighbor in the Village, Sarah Jessica Parker on the Today show this week. She was talking about some frothy aspect of dating related to her new movie, but her face grew serious at one point and she said that until you have known the experience of losing in love, you can never fully appreciate what it is that you gain in love. If you have not had a relationship or two fail, she said, you may not yet have the experience of being able to appreciate the right one when he comes along.

We all of us have known disappointment and sorrow in life, or at least we will, which means that to be human is to walk the Emmaus road, that intersection where what is and what might have been meet.

The good news of the gospel is that it is precisely at that intersection that our risen Lord stands, and joins us on our way. It is at that intersection that the Bible has its deepest and most intrusive meaning for us. It is at that place where we discover him in the communion and community of those where bread is broken and wine is poured and he is remembered. "Remember I am with you always," he said, "even to the close of the age." Because ours is a God who not only seeks us out, but also never lets us go.

Will Willimon, Methodist Bishop of North Alabama and former dean of the chapel at Duke University tells about a parishioner with whom he was talking recently.<sup>5</sup> They were having coffee and he asked her, "How have you been. How's your fall been going?"

“Well not so good,” she said. “Our son’s been putting us through hell.”

“I’m so sorry, said Willimon. “How old is your son?”

“He’s eighteen, and uh, we have not known where he was for the last six months. We basically changed the locks on the door. I pray for him every night, but we didn’t know where he was, and last week, during dinner, suddenly somebody is pounding on the door.

We open the door and there he is! And he starts this string of profanity.

I said, we’re eating, come on in, sit down and eat with us and he refuses to sit down at the table and he storms back into his room, he slams the door shut, and I can hear the door lock.

And my husband sat there and he got up, poured himself a drink, went out, turned on the TV. That’s kind of how he handles it.

And I put my napkin down and got up and went down the hall. I went out to the garage, and I looked at my husband’s tools and I got this big hammer, this large hammer. I walked back from the garage back in the hall, stood in front of my son’s door. I asked him, “Open the door.” And this string of profanity pours out.

So I took that hammer and I leaned back and hit with one good hit. I knocked the whole door knob, the lock, everything right off the door. Just split the door in two. And I barged through the door. And my son looked terrified. And I caught him right up under his chin like this and I slammed him up against the headboard of the bed and I said, I went into labor because of you. And by God I am not giving you up.

I think God is like that...

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2008.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, **The Magnificent Defeat**. New York: Seabury Press, 1966, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Buechner, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Blessed Brokenness” in **Gospel Medicine** (Cambridge: Crowley, 1995) p. 20-21

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *ibid.* 22.

<sup>5</sup> This account is quoted from Willimon’s first lecture “Jesus Saves” delivered at the Midwinter Lectures, Austin Theological Seminary, Austin, TX, February 4, 2008.