

“Meeting Jesus at the Table: Revived by the Breaking of Bread”
Luke 24:13-35

In 1986, the world watched in horror as the Challenger space shuttle launch ended in devastating tragedy. For years, NASA engineer Bob Ebeling carried the heavy burden of that failure. He knew, with a certainty that gnawed at him, that the launch should not have proceeded due to the dangerously cold temperatures the night before. He did everything he could to warn NASA, to present the evidence of impending disaster, but his pleas went unheeded. As Cynthia Campbell and Christine Fohr wrote, "He spent that morning gathering every shred of evidence that might help those in charge see the tragedy looming..." Soon after that fateful day, Bob Ebeling retired, a shadow of deep depression clinging to him for years. Thirteen years later, in an interview, he voiced the profound guilt that still haunted him: "I think that was one of the mistakes God made. He shouldn't have picked me for the job. Why me? You picked a loser."

Then, in 2016, an interview on NPR brought Bob Ebeling's story back into the light, and his words resonated deeply. What followed was an outpouring of human compassion. Letters flooded the mailbox of this 89-year-old man, frail in health, with heartfelt assurances that God had made no mistake in placing him at NASA. "God didn't pick a loser," one letter affirmed. "He picked Bob Ebeling, a man of integrity who did his job that day." Letter after impassioned letter arrived, filled with encouragement and compassion, pleading with this man they only knew through the radio to release the burden he carried. He even heard from two fellow engineers who had been there that day, engineers who had ultimately sided with the political pressures and signed off on Challenger's launch. They told him unequivocally: Challenger was not his burden to bear. And even NASA reached out, acknowledging that the Challenger disaster served as a constant reminder to the agency "to remain vigilant and to listen to people just like him—people who have the courage to speak up." Tragically, just three months after that initial interview with NPR, Bob Ebeling passed away. Yet, his family shared that those final three months were like a new life had been gifted to him. Because of the profound kindness and compassion extended through those letters and comments, he finally began to see that pivotal day, and his own role in it, in a different light.

Easter, in its essence, is about that very kind of transformation, that shift in perspective that the followers of Jesus experienced. The crucifixion must have felt like the definitive end, the crushing finality of their hopes. But through their encounters with the resurrected Christ, a new picture began to emerge, a reality beyond their deepest grief. Today, we turn our attention to two of Jesus' followers who were walking in the heavy cloak of dejection and hopelessness after his loss. They were leaving Jerusalem, the center of their shattered dreams, heading towards a small town called Emmaus. They had given up. As they walked, someone joined them, yet their gaze was inward, their hearts consumed by sorrow. But this stranger was persistent, gently inquiring about the source of their deep sadness. As they began to recount their loss, the weight of their grief hung in the air. Yet, the stranger responded with wisdom, sharing insights about life and death that began to stir something within them. Cleopas and his companion

walked and talked with Jesus for perhaps hours before the truth dawned on them. Even at a brisk pace, the seven-mile journey between Jerusalem and Emmaus would have taken a significant amount of time, punctuated perhaps by moments of quiet reflection. We are told that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." And yet, while their minds struggled to grasp who this stranger was, their hearts, on some deeper level, knew him. But their pain was too raw, too overwhelming, for them to fully listen to that inner knowing. How often do we find ourselves in a similar place, sensing a truth in our hearts, only to dismiss it because it doesn't align with our logic or because the weight of our pain feels too heavy to bear? They didn't recognize him until they shared a meal together.

Reaching their destination, the conversation still held them captive, and they urged the stranger to stay, to break bread with them. As they gathered around the table, he performed a ritual, a gesture that resonated with an uncanny familiarity. It was the way their beloved friend, the one they had mourned, used to share meals with them – the deliberate act of taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and offering it as a symbol of God's boundless, self-giving love. In that moment, the veil lifted. Their eyes were opened, and they finally saw what had been right in front of them all along: It was Jesus! But just as they reached out to hold onto him, to fully embrace the awe of that encounter, their rational minds seemed to take over, and the mystical experience, for that moment, ended.

Let's watch this powerful scene unfold in Luke 24:

[Include video link here: <https://youtu.be/Oqqh6zPULwQ>]

Luke 24:13-35:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, *but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. *But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

The gift of Easter, the power of the resurrection, is here for us today, offering a chance to be revived from those deep places of brokenness, those moments when hope seems lost. It is an invitation to see the world, and our lives, with the heart of faith, where all things become possible through the enduring power of love. Pay close attention to what God's Spirit is stirring within our own hearts, to trust that inner knowing, and to live each day with the grace of God as our guiding focus.

This reminds me of a story shared a few years ago in "Presbyterians Today," titled "Meeting God at the Waffle House." The author, a woman who had been an ordained minister for two decades, came to a startling realization: she lived in what she called a "Christian ghetto." Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, she primarily interacted only with other "churched" people. Seeking a different perspective, she took a sabbatical and worked as a hostess in a Waffle House for three months. Reflecting on her time there, she wrote, "The risen Christ showed up every day." The risen Christ appeared in a mechanic who fixed a stranded traveler's broken car for nothing more than the price of a cup of coffee. The risen Christ manifested in a landlord who drove over an hour to pick up a tenant he barely knew, who was stranded and needed help. The risen Christ was present in a lawyer who met clients at the Waffle House because they couldn't afford his firm's fees, turning no one away. There were countless other encounters, a daily revelation for three months: the risen Christ, alive and active in the present tense, in the ordinary moments and unexpected kindness of everyday life.

Macrina Wiederkehr beautifully writes, "We stand in the midst of nourishment and we starve. We dwell in the land of plenty, yet we persist in going hungry...In the light of such possibility, what happens? Why do we drag our hearts? Lock up our souls? Why do we limp? Why do we live so feebly?...The reason we live life so dimly and with such divided hearts is that we have never really learned how to be present with quality to God, to self, to others, to experiences and events, to all created things...We are too busy to be present, too blind to see the nourishment and salvation in the crumbs of life, the experiences of each moment...everything in your life is a stepping-stone to holiness if only you recognize that you do have within you the grace to be present to each moment." Amen.