

They were going home, disillusioned, dejected and downcast. They were leaving the Church. We don't know much about Cleopas and his unnamed companion, but Luke in his Gospel intimates quite clearly how they felt: beaten and oppressed. The Jesus they had come to know, upon whom they had pinned their hopes, from whom they expected so much, had been arrested, condemned to death and crucified by the Romans. Everything was as it had been before.

Jesus falls in with the two men, but they fail to recognize him. What does he do? First he listens to their sorry tale. He establishes a relationship of trust. He does not deny or criticize their feelings or experience. He enters right into their sense of disappointment. He shares their feelings with them. He is prepared to be where they are. Jesus knows very well from his own experience where these two men's hearts are. He knows from experience what human despair is. He knows death and the tomb; he knows what it means to be mortal. Cleopas and his friend gradually begin to perceive that this stranger was really no stranger at all. He understood them too well to remain strange to them for long. They saw that this man was not going to offer them easy words of comfort—quote them “proof text” Bible passages, bedazzle them with official doctrine proving his argument. No, this companion spoke from his own experience, his own convictions.

What does Jesus tell them? Not that death and the dissolution of life are unreal. Nor that their yearning for freedom is unreal. He tells them simply, but with conviction, that the Jesus on whom they had pinned all their hopes, the Jesus who was indeed dead and buried, that this Jesus is alive as the prophets of old had foretold. He tells them that for the Jesus whom they had admired so much, death and dissolution have become the way to liberation. And as he speaks his word from the depth of his heart and of his convictions the two travelers sense in their innermost selves not only the truth of what their fellow traveler is saying but that his faith, this truth, his way, his life can become their way too.

As Jesus was talking to them, they experienced in their hearts something new. It was as if their hearts were burning with a flame that came not from outside of themselves, but from within. Jesus had kindled in them something for which they had no words, but

which was so authentic, so real, that it overcame their depression. Their burning hearts revealed something completely new to Cleopas and his friend. At the center of their being, something was generated that could disarm death and rob despair of its power; a new confidence or a new joy in living.

When the three men reach Emmaus, so much had happened between them that the two companions were unwilling to let the stranger go. Between them and Jesus there had arisen a bond which had given them something new and so they invite the stranger to “stay with us.”

As Jesus accepted their invitation to stay with them, they go into an inn to share an evening meal. When they sit down to eat, Jesus takes some bread, speaks a blessing over it, and breaks it and offers it to them. And as he does so, they know suddenly and with unshakeable certainty that this “stranger” is Jesus, the same Jesus who had been put to death and laid in a tomb. But at this precise moment of their certainty, Jesus becomes physically invisible to them.

At the moment Cleopas and his companion recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, his bodily presence was no longer required as a condition for their new hope. The bond between them and the stranger had become so intimate that everything strange about him disappears. So close has he become that they no longer need a bodily manifestation in order to hope. They realize that the new life born in them is a life and Spirit which will stay with them and give them the strength to return to Jerusalem and tell other people why it isn't true that “it's all over”. That's why Luke reports that they went off straightaway to tell Jesus' other friends about their experience. Cleopas and his companion now became “evangelizers”, “apostles”, “intentional disciples.” Their story is now our story. In every Mass Jesus walks with us through his word in the Scriptures and breaks the bread and shares the cup of his Body and Blood. The story of Emmaus becomes our mission as we are sent from here to our spouse, children, friends, co-workers; any who search for meaning in life, any who are wounded, or lost as “apostles”, “evangelists”, “intentional disciples.” For whom is God sending me as a “Companion on the Journey?”