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On the road again  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
April 19, 2026  
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Based on Luke 24:13-35 (all of Luke 24 really)

Well - what do you think of that gospel story. What do you think of the idea that two of the disciples were walking down the road and they were so wrapped up in their own issues that they did not recognize that Jesus was walking with them. Is that even remotely believable? Can you imagine being so self-absorbed that you cannot see Christ in your midst? Well, let's start with a simple test.

[show "distraction test" clip <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4>]

[image: moonwalking bear]

If you failed to see the moonwalking bear, I can at least reassure you that videos like this are all over The Internet, which means that you are not alone. Many many of us fail to see something unexpected, particularly when we are focused on a particular task at hand. It is astounding just how much we can miss when we are too self-absorbed. Or when we are so focused on a particular thing that we can miss other far more interesting things. Perhaps the story of the disciples walking down the road with Jesus and not recognizing Jesus is something that happens all the time.

[image: look, but don't see]

After all, how many of us regularly fail to appreciate God in our own midst? How many of us regularly fail to appreciate that we ourselves are children of God? How many of us regularly fail to appreciate that this time - this place - the people we are sitting with right here - are all gifts from God? How many of us regularly fail to appreciate - well - just about everything as we grumble and complain our way through life? I don't think we should be too surprised that after the drama of a crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples were a bit distracted, a bit pre-occupied, and perhaps even a bit nervous of strangers on the road.

[image: open road]

We call this story the "Road to Emmaus". But the story is not about the road. Or

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the geographic location. The story is about whether or not we see Jesus walking with us every day.

To quote from Father Errol Fernandes, “This story of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, which is found only in the Gospel of Luke, speaks about the failure of two disciples to recognize their fellow traveler. The moment they recognize the Lord, he disappears from their sight. The story is for the sake of those who will believe without seeing. It tells us that the presence of the Lord can be known in experiences that transcend the events of the resurrection appearances. It tells us that, even in the darkest moments of our lives, when we are tempted to throw up our hands in despair, when we are tempted to give up, the Lord is walking by our side. We have only to ‘open’ our eyes to see.

Emmaus is not simply a geographical location. It is a place to which we go to escape from the realities of life when we find them too hard or harsh to bear. This may be an external place (a movie theatre, out of the home, somewhere on the road) or a habit (excessive drinking) or even an internal disposition that we may adopt (giving into frustration, despair, despondency, depression, etc). Emmaus may be a feeling that life is not worth living; that everything is in vain, that it is of no use to anyone whatsoever.

Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die, that even noble and pure ideals like love, fellowship, and freedom, have been twisted by people for selfish ends. The risen Lord meets us on this, our road to Emmaus, and assures us of his presence. He invites us not to give up or give in. He tells us that we must continue despite all evidence to the contrary, and that we must keep on keeping on. The story also warns us that the Lord will not always come in the manner in which we expect him to come and, that he may come when we least expect him.”

The failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus in their midst is therefore not an occasion for us to look down on the disciples. It is rather an opportunity for us to consider when - in our own lives - do we let ourselves get too distracted and preoccupied to see God in our own midst. We regularly say “God be with you” to each other. We say that God is with us - always. So when we do not see God in our midst, is it because God is

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absent, or is it because we are not looking? Is it because we are too busy doing our own thing to really look? We don't even need a show of hands on this one. We all let ourselves get distracted and fail to look for - and therefore fail to see - Christ in our midst. At least some of the time.

What is it that you get preoccupied with that prevents you from seeing God in your midst? Common barriers include: staying perpetually busy so you never have time to reflect on anything, fear (or it's friend anger), unrealistic expectations about life, unhealthy grief, lack of gratitude, addictions, lack of willingness to offer forgiveness, lack of willingness to receive forgiveness, lack of empathy, and perhaps surprisingly, lack of the ability to love yourself. These - and other barriers - allow us to put ourselves where we cannot see God in our midst. But God is always present. It is our own ability to see that changes. We are all very well-equipped to be blind to the grace of God whenever we like. As children of God, we are also equipped to see the grace of God in our midst too. We just might need a little help from time to time. And if you suffer from those barriers - or any other ones - then you've come to the right place. Because this church is a place where we help each other recognize and overcome our own barriers and to find God in our midst in real ways. And we do all need a little help from time to time.

The story is a great example of the principle that "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone". I believe that the disciples did not recognize Jesus so much as they recognized the effect of Jesus - through the action of breaking bread.

And for many of us here, how often have we recognized presence of God through an action. An action like when someone goes well out of there way to help someone. An action like when someone spends time to really relate with a troubled soul. An action like when someone doesn't just provide lip service but gets down and dirty with a person in need. An action where we do not calculate the costs before we decide to dig in and help someone in need. An action where - for a moment at least - we participate in being and bringing the kingdom of God to this time and place right now. Actions like those are times when we can more easily experience the presence of God. And that is true regardless of whether we are on the giving or the receiving end of the interaction.

Seeing God in our midst sounds like a passive activity where we just have to sit

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around and hope that we get lucky. But that's a description for fishing. We drop a lure in the water and hope that we get lucky. But seeing God in our midst is often an active process. Where we can find God in our midst through action. The action does not necessarily have to be large, or newsworthy. Sometimes, those actions happen almost by accident. But we all know what it feels like when we participate in that sort of action - when we participate in an act that brings the kingdom of God to this time and this place. Here. Now.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were distracted. But they were not just distracted. They were grieving and likely licking their own wounds to some extent. Emmaus was an escape hatch to them. They were mentally escaping - until Jesus appeared as a stranger in their midst. Mental escape is a choice. And when reality changes, we always have choice in how we respond to the external change.

When I was in ministry in Rexdale, we had a small building fire. We were very lucky actually. The electrical wires that brought power into the building caught fire. The electrical panel and stack were severely damaged. Fortunately, the rest of the building was fine. But we were left without electrical power. For 9 days. In February. When the temperature was averaging around -20C. Clearly, we could not use the building. So we made some quick plans. For the 1 Sunday in question the minister at a nearby United Church and I created an off-the-fly joint worship service that was well-received. And our mid-week activities like discussion groups and committee meetings moved to the Woodbine Mall. The mall had a food court, but they also had quite large areas scattered around the mall with tables and chairs which were very suitable for our gatherings.

In some respects, people loved the change. Evening meetings quickly became - come to the food court for dinner together prior to any evening activity. Many people loved sharing a meal together prior to gatherings. The meetings themselves became more sociable. More friendly. In some ways, the building fire created a wonderful opportunity. I started to dream about creating a mall ministry. In many ways, the congregation embraced the change that was forced on us. We chose vitality. We chose life.

But I would feel dishonest if I did not tell you how that story ended. Because once we got the power back and were back in the building, most of the congregation said,

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“Thank God that’s over”. And I cannot blame them for that. That event created change, but it was not enough motivation to have lasting impact.

Perhaps we need a bigger impetus in order to have real change in our own behaviour.

Well, what about the pandemic. That was a big change. How many of us changed in positive ways during the pandemic? Personally, I grew a lot. I refined many technical skills, including video production, audio editing, and graphics design. But beyond technical learnings, I learned a lot about isolation, loneliness, boredom, fear. I learned a lot about the human condition I would not have learned without the pandemic. Some people learned things during the pandemic - I believe that Glendale learned to paint for example. But many people did not. When the pandemic was over, many people just said, “Thank God that’s over”. Am I right? Was the pandemic enough of a push for people to change? For most of us, No!

Perhaps we need an even bigger push in order to change. Let me think. What else? What if someone came back from the dead. Would that be enough of a push to make people actually change? Our scripture reading today suggests .... No!

We just read the story we call “The Road to Emmaus”. But if we read just a bit more ... starting in verse 50, “Then Jesus led the disciples out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While Jesus was blessing them, Jesus withdrew from them and was carried into heaven. And the disciples worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Question: Why did the disciples go to the temple? The last time they meet Jesus was out on the open road! If they disciples wanted to see Jesus again they should have hit the streets. But instead, they retreated into their past. They retreated into spending their time in the temple. They preferred to sit in a sanctuary, all snug and smug, rather than to embrace the call to the open road.

What surprises me in the story we call “The Road to Emmaus” is that even the presence of the risen Jesus was not enough to motivate the disciples to change. The resurrection is perhaps the most astonishing event in history and even that was not enough to push the disciples out of their comfort zone.

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Do we want to meet Christ on our own streets? Or are we ourselves content to hide in our sanctuaries all snug and smug. I get it. The disciples did not like the message that in order to encounter Christ they needed to go outside their comfort zone. But how about us? Are we willing to go outside our comfort zones in order to meet Christ in our midst? Are we willing to walk our own streets in search of the divine? Is the anticipation of meeting the risen Christ enough of an impetus for us to change? Well, is it?

Just prior to the story of “The Road to Emmaus” we find Luke’s version of the resurrection of Jesus. In that story, the women went to the tomb and found it empty. But a man appeared beside the women and said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” And today - in our churches - the same question rings in our ears. “Why are we looking for the living among the dead?”

We need to look for the living among the living. If you meet Jesus in this sanctuary, then good for you. If you meet Jesus by sharing your life - your whole life with it’s joys and fears - with people in this congregation, that’s fantastic. If you meet Jesus by hitting the streets and taking your love into the world, that works too.

We are different people and our needs are different. But we do need to learn to see clearly enough to recognize Jesus in our midst. Being mindful that Jesus will likely not appear in a form that we instantly recognize. Or at a time that is convenient to us. We will be busy. We will be distracted. Christ will be with us. The only question is - do we recognize that presence in our midst.

The women went to the tomb looking for Jesus. They were told, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” We come here every Sunday. Same question. The risen Christ is out there on the road. Or perhaps in the Park. This is “Chapel in the Park United Church” after all.

Are we going to stay here? Or are we going to go find Jesus in our midst this week?

*Amen.*