

"MEETING JESUS ALONG THE WAY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
April 25, 1993

## "MEETING JESUS ALONG THE WAY"

### INTRODUCTION

There's a maple tree up here in Milford, Connecticut that stands about 80 feet tall that really hasn't changed much across the years. By now there are fresh leaves on it and every Fall those leaves fall off. There's a spot on that tree where a limb came off in 1985 when Hurricane Gloria roared through the area. Other than that missing branch the maple tree on Hawley Avenue has looked pretty much the same for as long as anyone can remember.

But that spot where the limb was blown off by the Hurricane caused quite a stir in the quiet neighborhood sometime back. It seems that a resident by the name of Claudia Voight looked at the tree one day and saw what looked like the face of Jesus. She recalls,

"It took my breath away. I told my friend to come over and pretty soon we had the entire neighborhood talking about it and coming over to look at it..."

Word spread rapidly throughout the town and before anyone realized it the maple tree became a popular attraction as car after car drove by to see the face of Christ on the tree. Some even parked their cars and walked a few blocks to witness this strange apparition.

Claudia, the lady who first made this discovery, described herself as one who attends church but is not "overly religious"...whatever that means. "I'm not one who reads the Bible all the time" she told a local reporter. For her that tree became a sign of hope. She said, "I just think people may be able to take some hope away from it...."

Another Hawley Avenue neighbor, Eve Mizera, brought her 17 year old son over to touch the tree in the hope that it would cure him of seizures from which he suffers. "You never know" she said to another resident, Cathy Cornwall, who in turn brought her three kids over to see it and touch it. She said,

"We have a lot of single mothers in our neighborhood and teenagers who have to make tough decisions in these hard times. It's like a message to have faith in ourselves and to have hope for the world!"

### TODAY'S QUESTION

This brings me to the question for this Second Sunday after Easter. Where in the world do we find Jesus? It's a question that has been asked by every generation, I'm sure. Where do we find Jesus in those times of heartache and disappointment and tragedy? The people of Milford saw what looked like a face on an old maple tree. Some thought it was the face of Jesus and that somehow it was a message from God. In recent years, people have reported seeing Christ's face on the side of a house, the side of a barn, and even on a town's water tower.

Where DO we find Jesus? You and I are skeptical of this sort of thing, of trees and towers, of barns and houses. And even more important, how can we even be sure that Jesus is really with us when everything seems to be going wrong. Perhaps today's Scripture Lesson provides us with a clue, an answer.

### THE WALK TO EMMAUS

What a weekend it had been for the followers of Jesus. The bottom had dropped out of everything. All their hopes and their dreams seemed to vanish when Jesus died on the cross. They were in a state of shock and fear. Everything happened so fast. You'll recall that on Easter Day the women reported seeing angels who told them that Jesus had risen and the disciples, at first, dismissed their report as something of "an idle tale". However, Peter, ran to the tomb and discovered that it was indeed true...the tomb was empty and he went home, "Amazed at what had happened".

Now that afternoon, two of the "believers" - Cleopas and an unknown companion - were making their way to Emmaus, a small town about seven miles from Jerusalem. It's a walk that would take about two hours. Maybe it would help them put the events of the past week in better perspective and help them to make sense out of it all. On the way they met a stranger. Actually it was the Risen Christ, but they failed to recognize Him. Luke tells us that He walked with them and asked them what they were discussing. Cleopas replied,

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? The Risen Lord asked, 'What things?' They answered, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.'"

Their discouragement and their lack of faith blinded them to the Risen Lord who was standing right next to them. Sometimes that can happen. It can happen to you and to me. We can be so down that we forget that finding Christ is really not all that difficult and we don't have to look on old tree stumps and water towers to find Him.

### IN THE PAGES OF OUR BIBLES

First of all, we find Him on the pages of our Bibles, there in the New Testament.

I wonder...have you ever had a Sunday School teacher who made the Bible come alive for you? I'm sure you have and what a privilege it is to teach others how to find God through Christ in a Sunday School class of children or youth or adults. This is why we like to pause and honor our teachers here on a Sunday like this.

Have you ever had the experience of reading a passage in your Bible and come upon a word that seems to have a message for you...just you. I think we've all that sort of thing happen to us. At such times we may be meeting the Risen Lord. It's good for us to go back and read a Gospel every now and then and let that life, that spirit of Christ rise up from the page and speak to us...to meet us where we are.

As they continued on their walk to Emmaus Jesus began teaching Cleopas and his friend what the Scriptures said about the Messiah. As He opened up to them the "Word", we read that their hearts "burned within them" and they began to discover just Who it was that was walking along with them.

Dan Wakefield tells us that he grew up going to Sunday School, but left the Church and was away from it for many years. Until one day when he visited the Holy Land. He said it was truly a "life-changing" experience. He thought

how amazing it was that he, Dan Wakefield, of Indianapolis, was standing on the very shores of the Sea of Galilee. The name "Galilee" was magic for him. It brought to mind images of Jesus and His disciples...men who really did walk there and who went fishing there. And standing there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he said he couldn't help but think of that old hymn, "I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked". He said he spent one entire day fishing with local fishermen there on the Sea of Galilee and that in that holy atmosphere, Dan Wakefield recalled those precious stories he had learned from his Bible as a boy in Sunday School. It was a memory that he would carry with him the rest of your life. Perhaps some of you have had a similar experience.

On the Road to Emmaus Jesus taught and interpreted the Scriptures to these two men. They would undoubtedly remember that special day for the rest of their lives. I made a trip to the Holy Land before beginning my ministry...it was in the Spring of 1954. I remember stepping out of a bus on that Emmaus Road and reading these verses to myself. You can't help but feel His presence in a very special way.

#### THEY REMEMBERED HIS TEACHINGS

But something else happened and this is a second point to put down. As Jesus spoke to them, they also remembered His teachings, those marvellous teachings they had heard as they gathered around Him. One gets the feeling here that Cleopas and his friend had heard Jesus on a number of occasions. In their state of confusion, they had forgotten what He had already taught them about His suffering, His death and His resurrection. And it was there on the Road to Emmaus that Jesus gently jogged their memories a bit and they remembered.

And isn't it true that we, too, find Jesus when we go to the trouble to remember what we have been taught in Sunday School or in a church service...by a friend, or a parent, or a teacher.

A Christian lady living in Turin, Italy shares the story of waking up in the middle of the night. A strong wind had been blowing for three days, shaking the pine trees and making them creak. She was in a low point of her life... feeling overwhelmed by discontent and disillusionment. She felt she was on the verge of collapsing. She opened her Bible looking for some comforting words. However, she did what she had always done and that was to cover her face with her hands and ask the Lord to be "with her". And then, in her mind, she began to sing a hymn that she had learned more than sixty years ago.

As she sang that hymn, she remembered being a child with her grandparents up in the mountains. She writes,

"Every evening after dinner, one of my brothers would come in with his guitar and would sing several hymns. I remember one in particular that went something like this....'sweet beautiful words of Jesus...they are the only truth, they are light for the heart...."

The words of that old hymn brought comfort to this lady. Her pain and her bitterness were eased and replaced by joy and peace and gratitude. Our faith is strengthened when we remember some of those things we have been taught along the way...scripture passages memorized, hymns familiar to us, a line from a prayer or perhaps a Creed of the Church. The familiar does help to bring Jesus closer to us, I think. "He walks with me and He talks with me"...

Back to Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus Road. They remembered the teachings of Jesus and this helped them to feel better about things than they did when they left Jerusalem a few hours earlier. And when they reached their destination, it appeared that this Stranger was going farther. They had so enjoyed His company that they "urged Him strongly" to stay with them. They said to the Stranger,

"Stay with us....because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over...." And the Risen Lord agreed.

BREAKING BREAD AT THE TABLE

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It was while they were breaking bread with Him at the table that their eyes were finally

They sat down with this Stranger to eat and Jesus "took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them", and suddenly they realized that this was no stranger at all. It was their Risen Lord and Luke puts it this way, "Their eyes were opened and they recognized Him." One can't but wonder, was it what He said? Or was it the way He said it or the way perhaps that He broke the bread and passed it. But it was when Jesus broke the bread that their eyes were opened. Sometimes that happens to us when we break the bread and take the cup during the Lord's supper. We feel Jesus in our midst, in a real way. But let me share a story with you that helps to open up this third and final point.

Dr. Tom Troeger in his book, Seasons of Worship, recalls the time when he had to be away from his fiancée for over a month in order to take some comprehensive exams while in his senior year at college. Being madly in love and having to be away from his fiancée made him very sad and very lonely. He was on a bus traveling from Ithaca to New Haven. The bus stopped off at the bus station in Binghamton, New York - the Greyhound Station. One or two of you may have been in it. It's a station that leaves a bit to be desired as do so many of our bus stations upstate, but anyway...Troeger sat down at a little dinette on one of those circular pedestal stools with the stuffing coming out. The counter was one of those U-shaped counters and he found himself sitting directly across from an old woman.

She saw him and said to him, "Boy...honey...you sure look depressed". Troeger remembers that he replied, "Yea...I am....I'm feeling pretty down, pretty low" Some tears started to moisten his eyes. The woman tried to reach across to pat his cheeks. He pulled back because the woman had some direct under her nails and she looked a bit unkempt. "What's wrong, honey" she asked. He told her about his fiancée up in Cornell and how much he already missed her. He took a picture of her out of his wallet and showed it to her and she said, "Oh...she's a beauty...pretty...such a beautiful young lady". It made him feel even worse, he said.

The woman told him that she had been married to a traveling salesman who had since passed away. They used to weep, she said, every time her husband had to go away. But how happy they were, though, each time he returned. Then she said to him,

"Our marriage was wonderful...and you're going to have a wonderful marriage. Everything will be just fine..."

She suggested that he might feel better if he ate something. She ordered

the last doughnut from underneath the scratchy plastic cover on the counter. She broke the doughnut and said, "Here, hon...eat this..." And just then an announcement came over the scratchy PA system and the woman said, "That's my bus to New York....I gotta go". And she got up and left. Troeger concludes that,

"...just then my eyes were opened and I recognized that the Christ spirit was there in that bus station in Binghamton, New York...."

Cleopas and his companion had their eyes opened when Jesus broke the bread and immediately they left that place and ran back to Jerusalem. They wanted to tell the other believers that they had encountered the Risen Christ.

CLOSING And we can find Him, too. We can encounter Him and meet Him along the way. It might be here on a Sunday morning when we gather for worship...hear the Scriptures, sing a hymn, break bread at a Communion service. Yes, we can find Him, too. Where, you ask? Not on a tree where a branch has broken off, but there in our Bibles....in something He said and something He taught.

And sometimes we fail to recognize Him even when He is there walking beside us. Remember that beautiful poem, "Footprints"...."it was then that I carried you". He does. They walked with Him, and "their eyes were opened and they knew Him." In the gathering dusk of that day, their hearts were lifted....out on the open road.

Some beautiful lines by T. S. Eliot bring this sermon to a close with the hope - that renewed hope - that His presence may be felt by you out there on the road you walk. He writes,

"Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together,  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you,  
Gliding, wrapped in a brown mantel, hooded -

I do not know whether a man or a woman -  
But - who is that on the other side of you"

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence, Lord, in this hour and in the days of the week before us. Remove from our eyes the scales of doubt and unbelief and indecision. Free us from bondage to our senses that so often limit our sight and our lives. And then help us to open our hearts and minds to receive the joy of Your presence in our lives...a saving, caring, comforting and living Presence - this day and always. In His spirit we pray. Amen.

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### THE WALK TO EMMAUS

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And isn't it true that we, too, find Jesus when we go to the trouble to remember what we have been taught in Sunday School or in a church service...by a friend, or a parent, or a teacher.

A Christian lady living in Turin, Italy shares the story of waking up in the middle of the night. A strong wind had been blowing for three days, shaking the pine trees and making them creak. She was in a low point of her life...feeling overwhelmed by discontent and disillusionment. She felt she was on the verge of collapsing. She opened her Bible looking for some comforting words. However, she did what she had always done and that was to cover her face with her hands and ask the Lord to be "with her". And then, in her mind, she began to sing a hymn that she had learned more than sixty years ago.

As she sang that hymn, she remembered being a child with her grandparents up in the mountains. She writes,

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Some beautiful lines by T. S. Eliot bring this sermon to a close with the hope - that renewed hope - that His presence may be felt by you out there on the road you walk. He writes,

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When I count, there are only you and I together,  
But when I look ahead the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you,  
Gliding, wrapped in a brown mantel, hooded -

I do not know whether a man or a woman -  
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PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence, Lord, in this hour and in the days of the week before us. Remove from our eyes the scales of doubt and unbelief and indecision. Free us from bondage to our senses that so often limit our sight and our lives. And then help us to open our hearts and minds to receive the joy of Your presence in our lives...a saving, caring, comforting and living Presence - this day and always. In His spirit we pray. Amen.

\*\* "My precious child....I love you and I would never leave you. During those times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints...it was then that I carried you"

PASTORAL PRAYER: April 25, 1993

O THOU who art the SOURCE of all things good, grant that we who are so often inclined to remember what we LACK may not forget what we have!

WE BLESS THEE for the warming quality of Spring: for green grass, budding trees and longer days; for parks and paths and bicycles, and for all the scents and colors that edge us each day toward the days of Summer...

AND WE THANK THEE for the interflow of ideas, for the sharing of convictions, for man's ability to receive and to infuse hope, and the lifting play of Divine Truth on the human spirit.

OUR HIGHEST PRAISE we reserve for YOU - our God - whose mercy is the same from age to age, and whose life-giving grace has been declared and revealed to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

CENTER OUR far-ranging lives in YOUR eternal love, O God, that in whatever time or circumstance in this city we may know and feel and celebrate Your PRESECNE, Your POWER, and YOUR PEACE.

TO LOOK at us as we sit here this morning, Lord, it would appear that our grip on life is firm and that we're managing things quite well, that we have come to terms with our fears, our failures, our frustrations....

AND YET, in our eyes as in Your sight, we are not the masters of our fate that we so often pretend to be.

LORD, we are anxious, deeply anxious about the well-being of our loved ones - children, parents and grandparents. Our jobs, our wives, our husbands, our health. We worry, too, about...

THE NUMBER and the power of our sins and the tug of these temptations with which we constantly wrestle behind closed doors.

AND SO IN THIS HOUR OF PRAYER THIS MORNING, show us each once again the connection between our anxious, restless minds and our lack of faith in YOU.

MAKE REAL in us the glorious, risen life that Jesus brought, lest the cares of either self or society rob us of the joy of life.

AND ANXIOUS though we be about the long view, help us to take without fear the short step immediately before us, knowing that of such the story of life is so often written. All this we now dare to pray in the name and spirit of Christ.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 25, 1993

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We welcome the visitors who have joined us here this morning. Pleased...hope that we'll have the opportunity to greet you. Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card. Or, sign one of the Guest Books. Come, worship with us. Come, work with us in the outreach concerns of our church.
- B. Doing the Lord's work here since 1837. Roots are deep in the soil....minister in the name of Christ, and it is in His loving spirit that....members: wear your name tags at the coffee hour, and make a point of making some new friends....

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are there for you in the bulletin. Review them carefully on your own, noting the spiritual growth and study opportunities of the coming week: "Hounds" (Tuesday), and the Aldersgate Class (Wednesday).
- B. Note the flyer that reminds you of the May 8th Spring Rummage Sale. Be in touch with Dianne Keller, if you can lend a hand.
- C. Next Sunday we shall have a special after-church opportunity... to enjoy looking at the paintings of some of our talented "resident" members....while munching on some special food for such an occasion. The flyer in your bulletin tells you in greater detail what it's all about. We're calling it the ART CONNECTION....so plan to be a part of it, connect up with other members and friends...next Sunday.
- D. This evening we shall be holding another of our CONVERSATIONS IN MEMBERSHIP...for those of you who in recent weeks and months have found a church home with us and who might like to consider membership in this church. New members: May 16th...three weeks from today. Come this evening if this is of interest to you and remember the words of Wesley,

"IF YOUR HEART IS AS MY HEART IS,  
THEN COME...GIVE ME YOUR HAND...."

To that I would add, "Hearts and hands are needed to keep this church alive and strong....minister to a parade of people, but we need some of you to be a part of that nucleus who keep this fellowship going...."

OFFERING

Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive...." Let us worship God with....