

Luke 24:13-35

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?" ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

WHEN STRANGERS BECOME BEST FRIENDS

I have a confession to make (yes, another one!): having thought long and hard about it, I've come to realize that I'm a Washington Redskins fan. It's true. Perhaps it was the Giant's last season that helped me come to terms with this; perhaps it's because today is Native American Heritage Sunday, and though I know there's controversy over the team's name, I suppose that the name at least draws attention to the people who originally settled this land. But I think my

allegiance to the Redskins is more attributable to good memories. You see, I remember Super Bowl XXII, back in 1988. Back then I lived in Richmond, Virginia, and I was an avid Redskins fan. Every Sunday I would be with my closest friends, all of whom were Redskins fans, at the home of Tom Miller watching the game in his living room. Super Bowl Sunday was a particularly festive occasion. And this was a Super Bowl unlike any I had seen (or paid attention to) up till that time. The Redskins were playing Denver, and despite Washington having a slightly better record than the Broncos that year, the Redskins were still three-point underdogs; John Elway of the Broncos was wooing many a fan with his athleticism and strong throwing arm, while Doug Williams was just starting as Washington's quarterback due to a shaky season with their first string quarterback Jay Schroeder. Williams had played only five regular season games that year, and Washington had just barely won their playoff games. There was a lot of reason for fans to be nervous.

At kickoff my friends and I very excited and hopeful. Even after Denver shut down the Washington offense on its first drive and scored a touchdown on the first play of their offensive drive, we kept our enthusiasm (though the room was a bit more quiet after that). Then Denver scored again. Then Washington's quarterback Doug Williams twisted his leg and was helped off the field. Then Jay Schroeder came onto the field, and was sacked on his first play. By the end of the first quarter the score was 10-0 Broncos, and the commentators made it a point of saying that no team had ever come back from a ten point deficit in the Super Bowl to win the game. A gloom rested over that living room as the second quarter began. But then the most amazing second quarter transpired. The injured Williams came back to the game and helped Washington come back, and by halftime Washington had an amazing 35-10 lead. I think it was the most dramatic comeback in Super Bowl history.

I'm bringing up this game because it reminds me of this walk to Emmaus in our Gospel reading today. I know that in the grand scheme of things the outcome a Super Bowl matters very little in the grand scheme of things, but our passions are so high during a Super Bowl, particularly when *our* team is playing, and when our team is winning we are ecstatic, and when it's losing we are downtrodden. Cleopas and his companion had just witnessed team Jesus come into Jerusalem and make a strong showing at the temple. But then they had seen Jesus decimated, crucified, by team Rome, assisted by the temple authorities, and they believed the game was over; they *had hoped* that the game wouldn't have gone quite so badly, and now they were leaving the stadium and walking back to Emmaus. Their leader had failed to redeem Israel. What they didn't realize was that it was only the end of the first quarter and that Jesus had already achieved the greatest comeback in world history by literally coming back from the dead.

But why does he do this in such a mysterious way? Why appear so unexpectedly, so unrecognizably, and so temporarily? Why not take the ball in end zone and celebrate? Why not a victory parade? And why does he wear a disguise? We come together every Sunday to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but our hero doesn't seem to be stepping so readily into the spotlight. So this is where my analogy with the Washington Redskins ends. Jesus isn't drinking champagne in the locker room. He's not even granting interviews it seems. We are called to

proclaim his resurrection and make disciples when all we have to go on is the testimony of others.

Well, maybe not. If we look at the story of these two people on the road to Emmaus perhaps you'll see that it is in fact *OUR* story, that it is every believer's story.

We begin with the basic truths that Jesus lived and that he suffered and that he was killed. These are all easy enough truths to swallow; death is no stranger to any of us. Nor is tragic death, nor is death of the innocent at the hands of the wicked. Sadly this sort of thing happens somewhere in the world every day, and sadly it's what we have come to expect, and sadly it strikes close to home sometime. How many of us know someone who died on 9-11 due a pointless attack on innocents? How many of us know a friend or family member who has been diagnosed with some horrible illness? How often have we seen tragedy strike the innocent, those we say are "too young to die"? How often have we, heard ourselves say the exact words that these two men on the road to Emmaus said: "We had hoped...we had hoped," I remember a friend of mine, she was about 29, I was about the same age, who I had worked with and who didn't show up for work one Monday and learning later that day that someone had killed her. At first I felt disbelief, that the news was not true, then the sadness sets in, and the truth life is not fair at all, but what can you do about it? We feel that God has forsaken us, because if he hadn't this terrible tragedy would never have happened. We may even wonder if there is a God. And we go back to life as usual, but with a little less bounce in our step. The smile isn't quite as big as it used to be.

And then a stranger in your midst bids us to share our pain, to tell him what "we had hoped" and what we no longer hope for anymore. We *had* believed, but now that belief is dead, and once it's gone it can't come back, because death is the last word, right? And this stranger, whether it be another person or just some voice we hear inside us, tells us that death is not the end of the story, because God is eternal and created us in his image, and his own Son stands as proof of this, and that all the powers of sin and evil cannot triumph over God. And suddenly our hearts, which seemed so cold and numb, begin to warm up, and hope is rekindled inside us. And we bid this stranger stay with us; we *need* him to stay with us lest we fall into the doldrum of doubt and despair. We invite that stranger to stay with us, to dine with us, and we are delighted and perhaps a bit surprised when he accepts our invitation. Then that stranger takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to us. Suddenly our eyes are opened and we know we are in the presence of Christ.

But just as we become aware of his presence, he's gone, and we ask ourselves "Was it a hallucination? Was I in the presence of God? Why couldn't he have stayed longer? But if we think a little harder you realize that the stranger hasn't really left us. We became aware of his presence at the time we doubted it the most, along that long road to Emmaus, when we felt that all hope was lost, yet he walked with us, listened to us, and spoke to us. And when we invited him to our table, he proved himself to be the host. You know it was Jesus, and you know that he was there with you when you needed him the most, when you doubted him the most. He stayed with you as long as it took to rekindle your faith, and now it's your turn to tell others.

Other tragedies may strike in your life; there will be many more tears to shed. But you can be sure that Christ will be there when everything seems to be going wrong, but he won't be a stranger anymore. He is your friend, and you know that where two or three are gathered, there he will be in your midst. May Christ be with you, and may he no longer be a stranger to you.
Amen