

# Someone Takes a Journey and a Stranger Comes to Town

Luke 24:13-35

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Some of you may have noticed that my prayers tend to mention certain things with great regularity. My guess is that this is true for many of us: we consistently thank God for our health, our food, our shelter; we consistently ask of God for guidance, strength, patience, and the wellbeing of our loved ones. At times, we may start to feel like our prayers are repetitive or even trite because we keep going back to the same well over and over again. The truth is that we continue to need these same things, not because our prayers go unanswered but rather because we are genuinely continually thankful for the basic blessings in our lives and because, deep down, we sincerely want nothing more than for God to watch over us and over those we love.

The problem isn't that our *desires* are clichéd; it is that our *words* are largely inadequate, and so when we find one that seems to speak to exactly what we hope to express to God, we use it over and over again.

One word I use recurrently in my prayers is "understanding." No matter how much I study, meditate, or listen to others, I feel like I could always benefit from a little more "understanding."

It is a carefully chosen word. It's not knowledge, which got Adam & Eve in trouble back in the very beginning. Knowledge seems to suggest learned details, bits of trivia, facts. It is something that can be absorbed relatively quickly and be committed to memory. Knowledge has its place, but it doesn't seem nearly as complex or nuanced as understanding. Understanding is also not wisdom, which Solomon was praised for seeking. Wisdom seems ethereal and mysterious and inextricably tied to morality. There is a rightness and a righteousness to wisdom. Again, it is a treasured value, but it is different from understanding.

The world is a confusing place. It moves at a breakneck speed, asking us to adjust our way of thinking and our way of life, sometimes giving little choice as to when and how we change. People are equally complicated and baffling. We think we know someone only to have that person surprise us; we decide to trust someone only to find that trust broken. We even shock and disappoint ourselves. God, of course, is the most perplexing of all, a mystery that we never really gain any sort of toehold on. When it comes to all of these things—the world, others, ourselves, our God—I would love to understand a little more clearly, a little more deeply.

This is especially true during chaotic, challenging, or uncharted times. When everything becomes less stable, we are more likely to crave some understanding.

The two travelers on the road to Emmaus demonstrate this perfectly.

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We often think of “Easter” as one day, or maybe one weekend, but the truth is that the season of Easter lasts for several weeks, taking us up to Pentecost. The aftermath of the resurrection is a significantly lengthy time, a time when the original disciples were marveling in disbelief at the things they had seen, a time marked by fear and doubt as well as joy and faith, a time of confusion and uncertainty, a time when steps of progress were taken to form the new church quickly even in the midst of all of that chaos. Easter Sunday is a day of wonder and jubilation, but the Easter season—the weeks that follow—is much more complex. It is a season that begs for understanding.

That first Easter season was not only complex but also consuming. The women and men who followed Jesus to the cross and then to the tomb only to be surprised by the living Christ could, understandably, talk and think about nothing else. They told the stories of where they were and what they had been doing when they heard he’d been arrested and tried. Then they celebrated with similar precise detail their experiences with the resurrection. They tracked the details of each narrated appearance, comparing notes with each other. The ones who had seen him with their own eyes were particularly gleeful; the ones who had not felt jealous and mistrusting and left out. We encountered this in last week’s gospel lesson about Thomas, and we encounter it again in this week’s lesson about two travelers. They, like everyone else who cared about Jesus, were completely consumed by this news and these stories, unable to speak about anything else.

None of this is surprising. Times marked by strong feelings of ecstasy and terror, the insistent tugging of faith and doubt, the mayhem that swirls around those feelings—these times are inevitably complex and consuming. When we find ourselves experiencing all of this, we are like the disciples: consumed because they are hungry, ravenous for any detail or nugget or prognostication they can get. They are consumed because they are craving understanding.

This is how we find Cleopas and his friend when today’s scripture passage begins: walking down the road and consumed with the events of Easter. It is also how Jesus finds them. Presumably wanting to see how they conduct themselves, Jesus keeps them from recognizing him, then asks a fictitiously naïve question. “What are y’all talking about?”

Scholars commenting on this story regularly note that Jesus is assuming the role of a stock character here: he is the one in control of the story, and yet he will take the position of one who bears no control and in fact doesn’t even know anything. He is baiting the travelers to take on a different archetypal role, the role of the know-it-all. Cleopas takes the bait, mildly chastising the stranger who doesn’t know what’s been happening in Jerusalem, then proceeds to tell him every little detail while we, as readers, get to laugh at the irony.

In these classic roles, the know-it-all never has every answer. Instead, the know-it-all is set up as one in need of understanding.

Jesus, never one to accept chastisement lightly, raps back at Cleopas, pointing out that he is foolish and then enlightening the two men with lessons and insights that captivate them completely. We get the impression that Jesus, in his teaching, even jars them from their fixation on the events of Easter because he is teaching them about things that go all the way back to Moses. And we get the impression that he shifts their attention because they seem to listen instead of speaking, letting Jesus do the talking. It is remarkable to think about someone being able to swing focus like this...and yet, it is not surprising, given that it is Jesus.

Despite this, we do not get the impression that they gain understanding. When the trio arrives at its destination, Jesus walks ahead, and the two other travelers still do not recognize him. They do, however, entreat him to stay, and he eventually acquiesces and joins them for a meal. Here, when he breaks the bread, they recognize him. Finally, they gain understanding.

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John Gardner, who wrote the standard-bearer *The Art of Fiction*, is attributed with claiming there are only two kinds of stories: 1) someone goes on a journey and 2) a stranger comes to town. This line has been misattributed to numerous authors, bent and mismanaged by many others. Despite this mismanagement, or maybe because of it, the line has thrived. There is truth within it: the best stories often do fit one of these structures.

The road to Emmaus is both of these, both “someone goes on a journey” and “a stranger comes to town,” so you know it’s going to be doubly good. It is a gorgeous story, one of the most brilliant narratives in the entire Bible. It can be dangerous to preach from this story, because its myriad lessons can get muddled or overlooked or underappreciated. But the story is too smart, too fascinating, too drenched in virtue for a preacher not to try.

First, it is fascinating that these two travelers fail to identify Jesus. The scripture tells us that this is because “they were kept from recognizing him,” suggesting that God the Father or Jesus himself puts blinders on their eyes, but the structure of this story indicates that there is another reason. In the classic framework of hidden hero and unknowing know-it-all, the know-it-all always bears some of the responsibility for failing to spot the hero.

Rick Vinson, who teaches at Salem College and penned one of the best analyses of the gospel of Luke, points this out with a nearly universal literary example. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the few surviving texts that predates this story in our scriptures, Odysseus returns home to Ithaca and puts on a disguise, assuming the role of the hidden hero. The disguise fools everyone: his servants, his friends, his son, his wife. Only his dog recognizes him. The disguise allows him to determine who is faithful and who is not, and he concludes his journey by dispensing justice so that those who deserve to can live happily ever after.

Part of why the Ithacans do not recognize Odysseus is that his disguise is a good one, but part of why they do not recognize him is because they are each too gullible, too lovesick, too selfish, too preoccupied, or too much in mourning to realize that their fearless leader has come home. The same seems likely for Jesus and the Emmaus road travelers: part of why they do not recognize him is because he does not want them to, but part of why they do not recognize him is because they are too consumed with the events of Jesus’ resurrection to realize that the resurrected one walks alongside them.

There is nothing wrong with focusing on Christ and his resurrection—in fact, it’s about the rightest thing these guys could do. The problem, I think, is that their focus has turned to fixation, and an inevitably myopic and self-serving one at that. They aren’t actually focused on Christ and his resurrection; they are focused on how their own lives intersect with the story of Christ’s resurrection, and to such a degree that they are unconcerned with the lives of others.

Part of the moral of this story, it seems, is that when we find ourselves consumed by something—particular in a disruptive time—we should pause and ask ourselves what, exactly, we are letting that fixation do to us. We should ask if we are becoming self-centered in our consumption. We should ask if our focus is skewed. We should ask these things even if the origin of our focus was something admirable, something as praiseworthy as the resurrection itself...because apparently even here, being overfocused can lead one to overlook Christ.

It is the standard danger, the classic mistake of the know-it-all: to seem incredibly aware and informed, knowledgeable and verbose, smooth and comprehensive...but missing one central detail that causes the whole package to crumble.

Cleopas and his friend make this mistake, and they also make the second mistake a know-it-all makes: they broadcast their knowledge with bombast instead of being more receptive. Initially, they primarily speak instead of listening. They not only think they know all there is to know about the previous weekend in Jerusalem but also insist on telling their traveling companion that they know all there is to know. They attest that they are experts.

Several years ago, my father and I joined a medical mission team from our home church for a trip to South America. One of the other members of this team was not a member at our church, a dentist named Tom who had a tenuous connection to the group but wanted to use his skills to help those in deeper need. At some point during the week, the dentist and my father ended up in a conversation about church, and my dad asked if Tom would ever be interested in visiting us. The dentist demurred, saying that people who went to church “seemed to have it all figured out.”

Dad paused for a moment, then said, “Tom, the people who think they have it all figured out scare the life out of me. I’ve been going to church for as long as I can remember, and the more I go, the more I realize how much there is left for me to figure out.”

We live in an era where it is trendy to have all the answers. Maybe every era is like this; I don’t know...but ours definitely is. It is a time of strongly expressed opinions, of vehement stances, of immoderate beliefs. It is an era of experts.

The road to Emmaus cautions us against being an expert, a know-it-all. It begs us to ask questions before issuing proclamations. It beseeches us to do this especially when we are consumed with something, especially during chaos or insecurity. It points out that we are apt to project certainty when things are the most uncertain...and that, when we do this, we are likely to misstep.

Mostly, it points us to seek out understanding.

There’s that word again. Many of you know that I am especially drawn to words that have multiple layers or meanings. The word understanding is certainly one of those words. Someone who seeks understanding is seeking a certain kind of insight, an appreciation for thought that lies between knowledge and wisdom. The travelers on the road to Emmaus tell Jesus “how do you not know?” and he responds with “how do you not understand?” before teaching them. When we think of “understanding” as a quality to be pursued, this is what we think of.

But when we think of “understanding” as an adjective, a descriptor, then it conveys something else entirely. Someone who *seeks* understanding is a hungry learner; someone who *is* understanding is compassionate and gentle and kind. Seeking understanding is of the head; being understanding is of the heart.

When the journeymen reach their destination, and Jesus attempts to go on ahead, they insist that he join them for a meal. They demonstrate warmth and hospitality. They correctly read that he has no place to eat or to sleep, and they prevail upon him to accept what they can offer. They are being understanding.

And when they do this—when Jesus breaks bread with them—they finally, for the first time, gain the understanding, the insight, that they have been seeking.

As soon as this happens, Jesus disappears. Moments of understanding—particularly moments of understanding God—are brief and fleeting. They are too wondrous to be held captive. Part of why we are continually seeking understanding is that it is so incredibly difficult to hang onto...but it is still worth pursuing, worth chasing after.

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John Gardner was a fantastic writer and a brilliant teacher. His understanding of narrative is both grounded in reality and undeniably literary. The rhythm and flow that we find comforting in our best-told stories is familiar because it is also so common in our lives.

“Someone goes on a journey” and “a stranger comes to town” really are two of the best hooks for a story, both a tale of fiction and the stories of our own lives.

The hero is often hard to see if you’re in the middle of the story and yet easier to observe from the outside.

The person who seems to have all the answers rarely does.

The person who talks as if he has all the answers pretty much never does.

All of these traits and truths become heightened in times of chaos, fear, and uncertainty.

When we discover that this is the narrative of our own lives—that we are living disrupted lives, surrounded by experts, consumed by events that may have caused us to shift our focus unintentionally—we need to pursue understanding, in every sense of the word, even if our grasp of that understanding is fleeting.