

# Covenant Word

## *Do We Know That It Is Jesus?*

Psalms 116:1-4, 12-19; Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
Jackson Shelton  
Pastor  
Sunday  
April 6, 2008*

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting  
to read and study these  
thoughts more  
carefully. Please know  
that I do not take full  
credit for anything that  
may be contained  
within, because I may  
have read or heard  
something at some point  
during my pilgrimage  
and do not remember  
its source and thus,  
cannot give the rightful  
author his/her credit. I  
pray that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.  
Sarah Shelton**

(I am indebted to Frederick Buechner's sermons "Secrets in the Dark" and "The Road to Emmaus" for the framework of this sermon.)

The movie *Schindler's List* is about the Jewish Holocaust. The primary character is Oskar Schindler who was a wartime profiteer, a womanizer, a heavy drinker, and a good friend to the Nazis. However, for reasons that even he apparently did not understand, Schindler became obsessed with the idea of saving as many Jews as he could from the gas ovens of Auschwitz. He

would commandeer them to work in one of his factories and in the end, he saved about eleven hundred Jews. So the movie is mainly about Oskar Schindler.

But it is also about the dark and anguished world in which Jew after Jew was persecuted. It is about the seemingly soul-less commander of the concentration camp. And it is about a little girl in a red dress.

Since the movie is filmed as if it were a newsreel from that particular time in history, it is viewed in black and white. But every now and then, in some crowd scene where children are playing or people are running or Jews are being herded onto railroad cars, the viewers see a single touch of color in the form of a little girl dressed in red. You begin to watch for this single touch of color, flickering like a candle flame in an ocean of gray. We watch as she hides under a bed while the Nazis set about to systematically shoot all the Jews they can lay their hands on in the Krakow ghetto. We catch a glimpse of her here and there until, finally, at the very end, we see a patch of her red dress buried almost out of sight in a mountain of discarded dead bodies.

It is this same stark black and white reality with which the disciples are dealing on the Emmaus road. Even though they had witnessed his colorful ministry, they

think that Jesus is dead and gone.

He had been crucified on a Friday according to the testimony of the gospel writers. Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, and the disciples were left to deal with the images that had been seared onto their hearts and minds from the previous day. They could visualize the three crosses and the darkness that descended. They could hear his cry of thirst and the buzzing of the insects. They could not get the smell of agony and death out of their nostrils. And so on Saturday, when the world paused to catch its breath, they were left to sort through what they had endured with him...however close or distant they were to the actual events. It was a day to imagine how life would be different without him and yet, how life could have a sameness about it too.

So for these followers of Jesus, maybe the worst day was the third one. It would have been the day that everything around them was returning to normal. It would have been the day that confronted them with the seeming truth that his life and death made no difference to the world at all. He had made great promises and great claims, and a number of people had placed all their greatest hopes in him. But now, the reality was: he was dead. The sun still came up, and the rhythm of living kept its established cadence.

***The Gospel writers tell it as truthfully and convincingly as they can. ... They tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious, and holy and fragile and unbelievable yet true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonor it.***

It is a strange story, but then I find that most of the post-resurrection stories are strange. I think what is oddest is that they are so unglamorous...

so lacking in drama. They have very little fanfare about them. If it were up to me, I would tell them differently. I would want to balance the stories of his resurrection with those of his birth that we celebrated just a few months ago. Remember? It is a birth where a star so lit up the sky that wise men left everything behind and brought fine gifts for this baby whose appearance even the stars announced. It is a story where angels filled the sky to sing "Glory to God in the highest!" And it is a story where shepherds come in out of the dark night to kneel at a manger.

We come to the resurrection stories, however, and the gospel writers have no choir of angels to proclaim his resurrection. There is no sudden explosion of light in the sky. There is not a single soul around to witness its occurrence. So is it any wonder when the disciples hear that he is alive again, they dismiss it as too good to be true? The Gospel writers tell it as truthfully and convincingly as they can. It was the most extraordinary thing they believe had ever happened, and yet they tell it so quietly that we have to lean close to be sure we hear what they are saying. They tell it as softly as a



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secret, as something so precious, and holy and fragile and unbelievable yet true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonor it. To proclaim the resurrection the way they do, we would have to say: (whisper) "Christ is risen." It is more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, then in that, then in no place at all...like a little girl wearing a red dress in a gray world.

Of course, there were the rumors about the tomb being empty.

The women had come back just after sunrise full of wild stories. Women were always telling fantastic tales! And rumors are just that, rumors...little bits of misinformation that cause more trouble and grief than they are worth. And so for at least two of the people that had followed him, there was nothing left to do that third day but get out of town.

One disciple is named and the other is not. The absence of a name in Scripture is always an invitation for us to write in our very own names. They leave Jerusalem for Emmaus, which interestingly, the commentators say they really don't know where this place is. So, it is safe to say that Emmaus was no place in particular. All we know is that it is seven miles away from a situation that had become unbearable.

Where do we go when our situations are unbearable?

I remember that when my father was sick and the tensions in the house would become more than I could bear, I would look for opportunities to escape to the garden, or to go to the grocery store, or walk to town and back, or drive to the local Hardee's just to drink a diet Coke. Emmaus is like this. It is a trip to the movies just for the sake of sitting in the dark with permission or attending a cocktail party just for the sake of the cocktails. Emmaus may be buying new clothes or getting our nails done or going to the barber for a shave. Emmaus may be buying a new car or reading a second-rate novel or coming home with more videos than there are hours in the day. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday and Wednesdays and Monday nights and as many other times as we can. Frederick Buechner says:

Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men <and women> have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by <the selfish> for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try and forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life. ("The Road to Emmaus")

This is why these Sundays after Easter are so critical to our journey of faith. It is why they are so precious to us as post-resurrection believers. For with the trumpets and lilies of Easter day put away, these stories, in their subdued, low-key way are closer to how resurrection was experienced by the disciples AND it is closer to the resurrection reality we are apt to experience.

Jesus shows up right in the middle of the questions that come with life's reality. He did not approach as if on high. No, instead, he walked and talked right alongside, making the

journey of faith with his friends until they were ready to recognize Him.

These disciples walk for the complete seven miles. It is a good length for a long talk. This stranger who joins them listens to

their version of the events that took place in Jerusalem. They talk scripture. They discuss theology. But do you notice that it is not the road talk that brings recognition? It is something much simpler. It is a gesture

at the dinner table. It is the way he takes the bread, breaks it and offers it to them. That's how they recognize Jesus...he was right there in the middle of their real life; right there in the middle of their questions; right there in the middle of their grief. He was present with them long before the moment of the breaking of the bread, but by the time they sat at the table, they are finally ready to see him. So he took the bread, broke it, and they recognize him at last.

I experience this sometimes in our families. We will gather for a Shelton birthday and Lloyd will begin to talk Alabama football. (Imagine that!) His sister Diane will lean over and whisper to me, "He's just like Dad!" I see it too. I see it in the way he holds his hands, the way he phrases his words and the way he leans his body forward when he gets excited. Or I watch my brother talk with a cigar in his mouth or I experience my South Carolina sister's cooking, or I observe the way Mary Helen handles a baby and there they are: our parents...still speaking to and being present with us in spite of the grave.

Surely these disciples knew the sound of Jesus' voice, the gait of his step and the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. But these were not how they knew him on the road to Emmaus. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

It is what I observed as I watched our own Billy Wood on the evening news a couple of weeks ago. There was Billy, with his great big smile, putting out the cookies for the homeless to eat at The Firehouse Shelter. Right there in the middle of desperate situations; right there in the midst of the mentally challenged adults; right there broadcasted by the secular news was something so much more than feeding the hungry. As Billy said, "I like to put out the cookies," for just a second, I saw something there. Something that reminded me of the way Jesus broke the bread.

On both Kenya Passport trips, our youth and chaperones had the experience of working a day with the children that are cared for at The Baptist Children's Center. On the border of the largest slum in Nairobi, The Baptist Children's Center maintains a full capacity because there are just so many children in desperate need. In fact, for security, the Center is surrounded by a fence with guards who maintain order. The other children, who are not

***... but by the time they sat at the table, they are finally ready to see him. So he took the bread, broke it, and they recognize him at last.***

admitted to the school or to live in the Center, stand outside the fence to watch and beg from those who are within the fence. This is particularly true at lunch time. The children of the Center are given their meals and told not to respond to the children who beg from the other side of the fence for fear that pandemonium would break out. So our youth sat with the Center's children as they ate knowing this would be their only meal for the day; knowing that those outside the fence might not be fed at all; knowing that because the children received this meal their parents might be able to eat; and knowing that no one would steal the plates of food from these children's hands as they might steal the backpacks filled with school supplies with which the children would leave that day.

I hear this story and I look at pictures like the ones on our bulletin cover and somewhere in their eyes there is something familiar. I recognize Someone who had a certain way of breaking bread and eating it with sinners and scoffers and with the least of these, so that I feel confident in asking: Do we recognize that it is Jesus?

Gerard Thomas Straub in his book When Did I See You Hungry? says: "God hides in a piece of broken bread as well as in our broken lives."

It was true that day that ended at Emmaus and it is true for us as we take inspiration and courage from this table which challenges us to ask:

***I recognize Someone who had a certain way of breaking bread and eating it with sinners and scoffers and with the least of these, so that I feel confident in asking: Do we recognize that it is Jesus?***

Do we recognize that it is Jesus when we are comforted by a friend?

Do we recognize that it is Jesus when we feed the hungry and house the homeless?

Do we recognize that it is Jesus when a good word is shared with the lonely and hopeless, the down and out, the disenfranchised?

Do we recognize that it is Jesus when color returns to a world that is too often bound by what others say is black and white?

So because we believe this to be the Lord's Table and not our own, we welcome all believers to receive communion.

And as the bread is broken...as the bread is eaten...as you see your church family walk these aisles as faithfully as the disciples walked to Emmaus and then ran back to Jerusalem, I encourage you to look at each face, consider each life and I believe you may just recognize that yes, it is, indeed, Jesus who is here among us listening, working and breaking the bread.

<Communion by intinction>

Perhaps there is one here today who has recognized their personal need for Jesus Christ. Should you have a decision of faith: to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, to serve as a member of Baptist Church of the Covenant, or to give your talents over to a full-time Christian vocation—we invite you to make these decisions public as we stand and sing hymn # 498, "O God, We Ask for Strength."