

“Jesus is Watching and is With You!”

My formative years in Cairo were a lot of fun. As a child, I would often ride my bike from our house located on 12<sup>th</sup> Ave. over to my grandparents house across town. It was a few miles through multiple neighborhoods to make the trek. On the way, I always thought that I was the all by myself. I was not scared or fearful, I just knew that I needed to keep going until I got to more familiar surroundings. When I grew older, someone shared with me an interesting insight. In all of the bike riding that I did, my grandfather would periodically follow me in his car to make sure that I arrived home safely. I cannot say that I even knew that he was there, but apparently without announcing his presence, he wanted to make sure that I was going to be okay. I also remember the time when my mother told me that my grandparents were most hurt. It absolutely tore me up inside. I was riding over to a friend’s house and did not stop at their house. My grandparents just wanted to enjoy time with me and I kept on going. I did not make the same mistake twice. For these and many more stories that I could share (and perhaps one day will), I am grateful to have had a grandfather like Francis Allen.

In today’s Scripture, it is a very similar situation. We call it “The Walk to Emmaus.” Many in our church including me have been on the Walk to Emmaus spiritual retreat, a wonderful journey that takes place over four days. On this walk, these two followers of Jesus did not know that Jesus was in their midst, but he talked with them every step of the way. When they finally reached their destination, he revealed himself to what they thought was dinner but in actuality I believe to be more like “Holy Communion”... as Jesus broke the bread with these two disciples.

Let’s hear our Scripture together today:

On the Road to Emmaus

<sup>13</sup> Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles<sup>[a]</sup> from Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. <sup>15</sup> As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; <sup>16</sup> but they were kept from recognizing him.

<sup>17</sup> He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. <sup>18</sup> One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

<sup>19</sup> “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. <sup>20</sup> The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; <sup>21</sup> but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. <sup>22</sup> In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning <sup>23</sup> but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. <sup>24</sup> Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

<sup>25</sup> He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

<sup>28</sup> As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. <sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

<sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

<sup>33</sup> They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together <sup>34</sup> and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” <sup>35</sup> Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

PAUSE

Let’s go back to verse 15. <sup>15</sup> As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; <sup>16</sup> but they were kept from recognizing him.

How many times has Jesus been right there walking along side, even helping you, but you did not recognize him?

I think about times in my life when for one reason or another I could not recognize Jesus in my midst.

In January 2004, I was a speaker on another church's youth ski trip to North Carolina. I'll never forget it. We had a great first day of snow ski until the unthinkable happened. As I was teaching two youth to ski in the snow for their very first time, a young man came sailing down the mountain above me. I caught a view of him out of the corner of my eye. The young man looked back up the mountain at his friends. In an instant, he hit a light pole. He spun until he came to a stop just in front of me.

Fresh out of my CPR and First Aid classes, I told a guy to go get help. He did. I checked the injured youth out. He was missing his left ear and struggled to breathe. I asked for his name and begged him to stay alert until help arrived. After several minutes, he stopped breathing. I began CPR. He started breathing again in the shallowest of breaths. In what seemed like an eternity, finally help arrived. The young man was whisked away by the ski patrol to be assisted further. I thought to myself, "My job was done."

After several hours of cleaning myself up, gathering myself, and waiting on an update, the people at the ski lodge said to me, "You saved him! You gave him CPR and saved him." I felt elated.

That night at the hotel, I thought back through the day. Something just didn't add up. I wanted to know more. I got in my car and went to the local hospital. I walked into the ER and asked for the young man by name. I said his name the first time. They didn't understand. I said it again, they looked perplexed. I said it a third time in desperation. They told me that they did not have anyone by that name. Confused, I said, "But I know that they brought him here!" "I'm sorry sir." As I began to walk out with a heavy heart because I did not know what had happened to the youth, the security guard in the corner of the room motioned for me to walk over. I did. The security guard said to me, "He didn't make it." Time stood still. I was in shock. I didn't know what to say and couldn't even move.

When I returned to the hotel, the youth from the youth group to which I was speaking asked excitedly, "Barry, how's he doing?" I should have said something else, but in shock all I could muster was, "He's dead."

Repeating the story again and again over the next several months was the most arduous task I've ever done. People wanted to know and they also wanted to care, but I just wanted to be left alone. I would go to work during the day and then return home to the emptiness of my apartment. Shortly thereafter, I returned to the pulpit to preach. My sermons were more about what I would preach if it were before the incident, because I wasn't sure how I felt or even what I believed at that point. I felt so distant from God because of where I found myself.

That was MLK weekend in January 2004. In February, I had already scheduled a Youth Director's retreat to Matamoros, Mexico. I spent a week with a group of Youth Directors doing mission work in what used to be a garbage dump. People lived there because they had no where else to go. One day, we had prayer meeting. The preacher didn't speak English in the one room church and we were supposed to go around and share our prayers. I felt numb. I didn't want to. I was honest. I was really struggling with what had happened. A lady named Kim was also there from Miami. She said she was mad at God because she worked in a nursing home where people were constantly dying.

As we talked more, we started to pray. As we prayed, we sensed the presence of God in the room. We began to cry because we both were broken and we sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit in the room. The more we talked, the more we realized that God did not abandon us or even cause those bad things to happen. God was right there all along and God was the only one who would never leave us or forsake us. In spite of all that we were both going through, God was there to see us through our pain and discomfort. The local preacher shared in Spanish through an interpreter that God is with us and that God's peace and hope are enough to see us through the trials and anguish that we will experience in this world. And, this was coming from the shepherd of a flock who literally lived in a garbage dump of all places! Maybe it's fitting that Galgotha, the Place of the Skulls was the garbage dump in which Jesus was crucified. Out of that garbage dump Jesus brought us life through his death and in that dump that day I found my life through the power of God yet again!

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How many times is Jesus walking along side of us, asking us questions, eagerly waiting to see what our responses will be?! I believe that part of the reason that he blocked the disciples from being able to recognize him is that they would be like my Lola when I first get up in the morning! Our labradoodle is so excited to see

me that she must love on me before she can even think about going potty. It makes me think that Jesus cared about these disciples so much that he wanted them to be able to have a little therapy session as they talked it out before he revealed his true identity to them.

## PAUSE

I'm doing a lot of reading right now, and it says that one of the biggest factors we will have to deal with in the aftermath of this pandemic is our mental health. Even if jobs and social networks recover, many people's mental health will be a casualty of war because of what they are experiencing right now.

Let me give you a few keys that helped me in 2004.

First, talk to someone. Don't go it alone. Talk to Jesus. Tell him how you're feeling. Find a friend and keep the lines of communication open, even if that is hard for you to do. Talking to someone else is like a pressure release valve that allows you to let go and let God.

Second, stay busy with the right things. Find something that will come with an element of furthering yourself. I look every day on the Crosswalk Facebook Page and am heartened by their assistance ministry. I think about the masked shortage and how people are making surgical masks. All of these and more are responding to needs in our community. Stay busy with what you can do. Here's an idea. How can you thank an essential worker this week? I saw where a guy had a stack of toilet paper on his front porch for the mail and delivery guys. The delivery guy asked the man, "What is this?" The man replied, "I'm just thanking you for your service!" I yelled across my lawn the other day at the postal worker, "Thank you!" He waved back.

Third, realize that sometimes it's not about things just returning to normal. It's about finding a new normal. Allow yourself the freedom not to make things exactly as they were before. Maybe it's an opportunity like when a home is destroyed because of a disaster to make it even bigger and better than before. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" In the immediacy of 2004, it hurt like nobody's business. In the aftermath, I grew stronger. Romans 5:3-5 says, "we<sup>[c]</sup> also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not

put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

So, talk to someone, stay busy in the right ways, and find a new normal. Jesus is always with you.

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And now it is time for us to say thank you! Thank you to those on the very front lines of covid 19. We thank Post office workers, restaurant worker, grocery store clerks, School teachers, elected officials, those keeping our internet running, newscasters, truck drivers, warehouse workers, sanitation workers, those keeping our lights on, bankers, and so many more!

I am praying for you daily and I encourage all of my counterparts in Christ who are watching today's service to continue to pray for you as well. I invite all of us Christians to keep our lit crosses up on our lawns with dusk to dawn timers on them so that when these people are passing by in the darkest hours of night, they can see the light of Christ shining in a powerful way. Faith over fear!

I also want to thank all of those who are listening to their local officials and following the guidelines set forth. I believe these guidelines are for our betterment, and while I hope we can be together again soon... not yet!

A reminder as we mentioned earlier that Matt Sweat and the Crosswalk Class are still coordinating with the Sheriff's Department to offer groceries and pharmacy runs to the most vulnerable right now. The City of Dublin is doing the same. There is no shame in taking part in this opportunity. Stay in, and allow someone to help you if needed. Again, Matt's cell is 4782790196. We pray for those who are experiencing spousal and child abuse. There are resources available to help you. Also, let's keep a close check on those who are alone right now. Friends, check on your neighbors and especially those who live alone right now. Just ask them, "How are you doing?" and let them talk. Whether or not these situations fit your circumstances, call or text me and tell me how you're doing. 912-585-7247.

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Jesus wants a relationship with you. Whether you are accepting Christ for the first time or for the 100'th time, I'd like to invite all of you to receive Jesus into your heart today. You can do so by saying the salvation poem today. As I read a line, you say it to Jesus as a way of inviting him into your heart...

Even when you are not aware of his presence, Jesus is watching you and walking with you. Let us pray.