

SLOWING DOWN TO THE SPEED OF FAITH

(The Emmaus Road)

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I The Background

Yes, it was Easter Day, which looking backward for us has a clear series of events as recorded in Scripture. Everything has a context that is essential for understanding and growth. The resurrection is connected to the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The shocks of those events are enormous. Anyone who has experienced grief (Is there anyone who has not?), knows that the shock makes the livable world stand still. We expect the world to go on as it did yesterday, always moving ahead, but grief sends us reeling backward. We are caught up hitting a stone wall or in a frozen time warp, with a loss of life. It takes some thawing out, some time of reconciliation with the reality that someone close to us is gone, no longer alive in this world.

The reactions are wild and irrational: We must join that other person in death to stay connected. We must do something to get them back into our world. We must blame someone else or God for not being fair. We must sue somebody or hate somebody or die. The reactions are strong and human; our mortal status is never accepted at an emotional level. We are alive, and others who are important to us must also be alive.

II The Story

Two disciples left Jerusalem that Easter Day in shock. Cleopas and his daughter (I take Walt Wangerin's depiction of the other disciple as Cleopas' daughter. See The Book of God.) were going home without really understanding of what they were doing. They were doing the usual, trying to gain a footing on the unusual, the bizarre, the stuff that was incomprehensible in the shock in which they were caught. They lived in the suburbs and decided a retreat to their home

was a way to gain some distance and perspective on the radical events that shook them.

Yes, they were acquainted with the other disciples of Jesus. They had witnessed some of his activity, especially in Jerusalem, and were caught up in the enthusiasm that involved a hoped-for new beginning for the people of God, including the eventual overthrow of the Roman occupation of their homeland.

This was fueled by Cleopas' dream of getting his own life together better since his wife had died and left him with the task of raising their daughter, who had become his constant companion and "partner" in maintaining a household. He wanted to move on with his life but had grown dependent on his daughter's support and helpfulness. It was hard to even think about her growing up and making a life of her own with another man. Why couldn't things work out the way they were supposed to? Why hadn't his wife lived to be his life-long companion? Yes, he carried some residual anger from that grief as well. He could blame God like the rest of us people!

The First Mile

It was a reasonable day for a walk. Cleopas and daughter had bid the other disciple friends farewell. It wasn't raining, and it was cloudy, but they didn't notice the weather since they were locked in their own shock and gloom. The ambivalent steps towards home were slow and heavy. Maybe they ought to remain in Jerusalem with the others who were huddled together in fear of being assaulted by the Jewish leaders and sent to Pilate like Jesus had been. After all, those angry and zealous religionists were trying to rub out all traces of this Jesus. Cleopas felt they would be safer at home in Emmaus, away from this hotbed until things had cooled off a bit. He needed time to think. He slung his pack over his back and headed out of town.

Slowly they trudged on, sometimes looking back to see if the city had changed or was even still there. Rarely did they look down the road.

The landmarks along the road were very familiar. There were other people on the road, some moving towards them, trying to get to Jerusalem before sun down. Some had been out working in the farms around the city. Perhaps these were away, and hadn't heard the tumultuous events that had taken place there in the past few days. Cleopas and daughter pretty well ignored those they faced coming into the city, especially those who looked like members of the priestly class or soldiers out on patrol.

"Maybe we should go back," the daughter said. "There is nothing we can do at home, and maybe something will turn up to change everything." She had a child-like faith that believed more in magic than did her father. She thought they ought to explore the story of the women who said Jesus was alive. Sarah, for that is what her mother had named her, had less experience with grieving. Her mother had died when she was quite young. She still hoped that someday her dad would give her another mother in her life. Perhaps one of the other women disciples of Jesus would be just fine for Dad; she thought, but never vocalized.

Slowly the city sank into the horizon behind them as Cleopas said less and less, lost in his own despair of the future for himself, his daughter and his country. He acted like God had died, and there was no hope, even though he heard the stories about Jesus being alive. That had to be crazy hysteria, he concluded, but he couldn't make sense out of anything else either. He was alone with himself, even with his daughter at his side.

Mile Two

Cleopas was lost in thought, but made sure he didn't walk any faster. He saw a group of travelers up ahead, and he wanted no confrontation or even conversation at this time. He seemed locked in his aloneness and feared moving out of it. Sarah turned around suddenly as she thought she heard footsteps behind them. She was right; this stranger was walking alone in the same direction as they were going. "Oh, hello," she said and then realized that her dad had

told her never to talk to strangers, although she felt safe to do so in her father's presence.

The man smiled back to her and moved to the other side of the road so as not to disturb them and to give them their space. Cleopas looked around furtively to see to whom his daughter had spoken. He nodded to the man and turned back to his own walking. Cleopas quietly chided his daughter about talking to strangers, especially after all that was going on. He told her: "You never know if one of them was following to have them arrested too. She defended herself a bit saying the man was a gentleman and didn't look like he meant any harm. She said she was worried about him walking by himself.

The man seemed to keep the same pace while they were taking. At first this worried Cleopas who slowed down a bit only to find the man did the same. Finally, the stranger spoke, "You folks seem to be walking in some fear." Cleopas' immediate reaction was to tighten up even more. This man was just too clever or too naïve for comfort. He chose to walk further in silence, partly hoping the stranger would give up conversing and quicken his pace since Cleopas and Sarah were still plodding along. However, the stranger seemed content to walk in silence alongside of them.

Sarah let the silence pass awhile, but she just had to speak up after a bit. She started a bit of chitchat. "Dad and I live in Emmaus. Are you headed that way also?" The stranger nodded but respected Cleopas's desire for silence. However, finally Cleopas spoke up as well. Out of fear and anger, he said sharply, "Are you the only one who doesn't know what just happened back there in Jerusalem?"

"Well, it's a big city with much going on daily. What happened there that has you so upset?" said the stranger. Cleopas began to detail the events of Jesus' last days and the political hopes many harbored for this man as a leader to champion the Jewish future, to get out from under the harsh Roman rule. He caught himself as he realized he had made himself quite vulnerable to this man if he was a Roman sympathizer, so he tried to modify his words somewhat. "I mean

there's been secret meetings of the Sanhedrin while we slept. They had Jesus arrested and handed over to Pilate with charges of treason, demanding he be executed. He was crucified out on Golgatha with some others on death row just before Passover. The city's still in turmoil. Surely you've heard all this?"

The stranger nodded as if all the facts were in order, but he ask Cleopas what sense he made out of all this. Cleopas just continued, "Now this morning some women who had gone out to the grave site to anoint his body and grieve came running back with news that his body wasn't there. They told of seeing angels instead who said Jesus was alive. Now that is preposterous!"

The stranger calmly nodded, and they walked somewhat further in silence.

Mile Three

Sarah broke the silence again when it looked like neither of the men were going to speak further. "One of those ladies is our relative. I know she would never lie. I believe her, so maybe they didn't really crucify Jesus dead after all. Maybe he was just wounded and recovered, or maybe it was a miracle."

The stranger puzzled a bit. "The Roman soldiers are very careful about those executions. They would never give away the body unless it was surely dead. In fact, they drive spears into the body to make sure he's dead before they take the body down. They would be in line to be crucified themselves if they didn't follow through on their orders to crucify a man until he's surely dead."

"That's right!" said Cleopas. He paused and muttered, "That's why it just doesn't make any sense." More silence followed, but Sarah was the one who usually broke it. "Well, then, it must be a miracle. I often pray that God would bring back my mother. I understand Jesus even made a man come alive again in Bethany after he had been in the grave for 4 days." "Sure, sure," chided her father, "some women can

imagine all kinds of things if they are really wishing for something like that to happen, but I can't base anything on that." Cleopas was really getting into this discussion now with some animation.

"You must be a friend of Thomas," said the stranger, which made Cleopas pull up with a start. "How did you know that?" he insisted. "I've been around all the disciples of Jesus over the past week, and I don't recall you being among them. How do you know Thomas?" There was a faint smile on the face of the stranger but he simply said, "Oh, I've had some discussions with him, too, but it all goes back a ways."

Mile Four

The pair was intrigued by the stranger's words and stared at him with questioning eyes. He began to talk about the old days, the really old days. He began with how God made everything new out of nothing, how he made a new world after it was destroyed by the flood, how he made a new nation out of Abraham's seed.

He kept making a point that God comes through with a gracious surprise just when everything looked like it was all over. He recounted the story of Abraham, who was at the end of life without an heir but how God intervened and gave him and Sarah a son when he was 100 years old. Then, when son, Isaac, was just a young lad how God told Abraham to go to Mount Moriah and sacrifice his only son. Abraham did what the Lord commanded even though it looked like the end of the line for his life and the life of Isaac.

The stranger drew a dramatic picture of how God provided a substitute sacrifice for the altar Abraham had built, a ram caught and waiting. Cleopas and his daughter seemed to rejoice with Abraham at being given back a living son.

The stranger moved on to recount the story of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorra while rescuing Abraham's nephew, Lot. He talked about Abraham's seed, the children of Israel over which God

watched in good times and bad. They listened attentively as he told the stories of God's leading Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea and into the land of promise in which we now live. He noted that the voices of the prophets kept talking about a future salvation of God's people. He noted how He used the prophets to comfort his people taken away into exile.

It wasn't that they hadn't heard these stories from their childhood. These were stories that had been handed down for generations. It reminded Sarah of her mother who used to tell these stories to her as a child. However, this stranger was telling them in a way they hadn't heard before. It was like it wasn't a history lesson, but a story in which they were involved in the present. They were captivated and felt drawn back to the earlier times of their own lives. They were walking forward on the path, but in many ways they were walking backward in their thinking, feeling and understanding.

Finally, Cleopas intervened. "You tell those stories so well. It almost sounds like we're hearing them for the first time even though we grew up with them. You remind me of the story of the prophet Jonah, who was sent with a message from God to Nineveh. He went in the opposite direction and ended up in the belly of a big fish for three days before being given a new lease on life to go to Nineveh to speak a word for God. Somehow I just connected that story with Jesus. Maybe he had to be dead in the earth for three days before coming back to life to speak more words for His Father, whom He called God. It makes me wonder if he isn't around doing that right now."

The stranger nodded. "It really is all one story, isn't it?" He commended them for putting themselves in the story of God and His people. "Maybe the old Rabbi was right when he said: God made man because He loved stories."

Time was flying as they listened to the stories. The landmarks were flying by without them paying them much heed. They didn't even

notice how they were walking in perfect step with the stranger as the miles went by. Their pace had quickened.

Mile Five

“And so,” the stranger who had brought them into the present situation in Jerusalem continued, “it really is the fitting work of God to bring His Son into this world. He has let him rub elbows with us, experience our fears and pains, and to suffer and die for everyone, but rise again to give all people hope and an eternal future.” A long silence came once again.

This time Cleopas broke it. “Well, the way you tell it sure puts a different slant on things, but I’m filling with fear again that maybe we’re too close to God. Can He really be here in all this confusion and turmoil in Jerusalem? It’s hard for me to fathom. Why doesn’t everyone understand this the way you explained it?” More silence.

Sarah broke in this time. “I sure like the way you tell stories. You remind me of my mother. I could listen to her for hours too. I so miss her. Do you think there is a resurrection for her also? I mean, I can only imagine what that would be like.” Before the stranger could answer, Cleopas took the stage again, “Are you a Rabbi?” You don’t talk like one of those in Jerusalem. They had nothing good to say about Jesus. And yet, you seem to know the Scriptures better than they do, or surely tell it in a different way. You make it sound like God had this very day in mind a long time ago. Here we are just walking along as if we are in the story.” The stranger smiled. “If we all look for the coming of Messiah, then were are all part of the story, are we not?” They both nodded.

While it been gray day so far, the sun seemed to break through the clouds which did not go unnoticed by Cleopas. He said, “Thomas told me that Jesus once took Peter, James and John up a mountain where a bright light broke through the clouds and a loud voice said, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” I wasn’t sure it happened, but hearing you talk makes me think it did.

The trio walked with lighter steps and quicker as they kept going over the stories the stranger had narrated. Cleopas and Sarah added some personal stories of their own of how God had blessed them over the years, even through the death of their wife and mother. They couldn't quite afford to live in the big city, but their country home was cozy and meeting their needs. They had their own garden and animals. They certainly did better than the beggars they saw in the city.

Mile Six

The sun was getting lower in the western sky and some of their neighbor's places were coming into view. Some were out doing things in their gardens, so they waved as usual. Sarah and Cleopas walked along as if they had just found a great friend whom they were escorting into town. They were glad to have his company. He seemed so calm and undisturbed by the radical things that had happened in Jerusalem. They were eager to point out the landscape and the neighbors to this stranger who had walked with them. Neither one had been bold enough to ask his name yet, but then, they were hesitant about sharing their own as well.

The discussion continued about God's plan in all this. "Does God really think it is good for us to suffer and die, then?" asked Sarah, who then laughed at herself as she stepped on a bug that she disliked. "Everything in this world does die" he mused.

Her Father was still wrestling with his anger with Jesus who left them. "I guess none of us wanted to listen to Him when he said he would suffer, die and rise again. In fact, I forgot all about him saying that at all until just now. Nobody likes to talk about dying, especially their own." The stranger seemed to nod and encourage the discussion. He even talked about his early upbringing in a large family with many brothers and sisters. Sarah looked sad saying she always wished especially for a sister. She talked about it being lonely

in life, even though she had a dad she thoroughly adored, but it just wasn't the same.

The stranger reminded them of the large family to which they all belonged, those who looked for Messiah to come together. Cleopas remarked about his disciple family that was back in Jerusalem. At the moment they were just glad they all had each other who shared a common walk and talk experience. The last mile seemed to be coming quickly.

Mile Seven

"Look," said Cleopas, " we're getting close to home and it's getting towards dark. Surely, you need someplace to stay overnight so why not spend it with us. We have food and drink to share with you and a spare bed in our upper room, if you prefer. You can see we've brought a fresh loaf of bread back from our favorite baker in Jerusalem."

The Stranger politely bowed and thanked them for the offer. He acknowledged he would not make it to his home by night, reluctantly agreeing to spend the night with them. Sarah ran ahead now to draw some water and have a towel handy for the stranger to wash up before dinner. It was along dusty road they had traveled. This left Cleopas to talk to the stranger alone for a time.

" Your daughter loves you very much," the stranger observed. "Yes," agreed Cleopas, " but I worry about her future. She has nothing except to care for her aging father. I hoped she would marry and give me grandchildren one day, but I fear she won't be able to leave me." "Well," said the stranger, "You spoke with a certain affection when you described the women who returned to share the story of the empty tomb. Perhaps you should consider her for yourself. Cleopas blushed. "Well, I suppose I should consider that Mary. She's an honest woman and one who wants to minister to others like Jesus."

Some silence passed as they heard Sarah up ahead greeting others, laughing as she ran. Like her father she was torn between telling everyone whom she met about walking together or not saying a word. They wanted to enjoy his company without any interruption for as long as he was there. Sarah thought it still might be a dream from which she might awaken.

At Table

So her father and the stranger finally joined Sarah. Together they gathered some things to eat and share with this stranger while he washed himself up to prepare for the food. They were all of the same ethnicity and religion. They asked the stranger to lead the table prayers. They listened to him say the common prayers, and they began to wonder if they had ever heard that voice before. As they looked up from prayer, he was taking the loaf of bread they had brought and breaking it for them to eat. The words from his mouth shot through them like a sword: "Take, and eat. This is my body which is given for you." They felt something like scales fell from their eyes, and they realized the Stranger was none other than Jesus himself. They noticed his scarred hands for the first time. They stared in amazement while he fade from view altogether. They were left with the broken bread.

Cleopas and his daughter looked at each other, somehow to assure themselves that they had both seen the same thing, the same breaking of bread, the same Jesus. They hugged each other with joy and ate the bread. They talked about how each had a warm feeling when he told them the stories on the road. This was just too good to keep to themselves. It had taken over 2 hours to walk home from Jerusalem, but they decided to go back and tell the others. Running they might make it before dark, maybe in 45 minutes. Taking nourishment and drink they ran back to the city only to find that Jesus had beaten them their and had appeared to the disciples gathered there as well. It was a bonding experience for them all.

And Cleopas found the other Mary among the group to which he told his story in more detail and with greater fervor than the rest.