

BELIEVING AND LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Luke 24:13-35

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I love this unbelievably, believable story. Believable, because many of us have had similar conversations during hard times with good friends that ended with new insights and deeper faith. Unbelievable, because it's about two men having a supernatural encounter with someone who appears to be a wise and knowledgeable stranger but suddenly disappears from sight after revealing himself to be their Risen Lord.

Because this story has blatant elements of unbelievability a lot of people will quickly reject it as one of those mythical Bible stories sophisticated people should never fall for. They'll explain away the two disciples as being so grief stricken and inconsolable they hallucinated seeing Jesus hours after he was officially declared dead.

I consider myself a fairly educated, quasi-sophisticated man, and yet I believe with all my heart this unbelievable story, precisely because it's totally believable!

Two disciples of the late and lamented Jesus of Nazareth were heading home from Jerusalem after a terribly unforgettable Passover. The man they believed to be the Messiah, following a sudden drop in popularity, was quickly put to death. They heard strange rumors about a resurrection, but these tales sounded more like the last gasp of desperate men. Poor Peter, James and John, their first mistake was believing unconfirmed reports of hysterical women.

As these two companions commiserated over what was and might have been suddenly a stranger was walking with them. "What are you so intensely talking about?" the stranger innocently asked. They answered back, "Are you kidding? Jesus' execution is front page news. Where have you been?" Then their indignation quickly turned to melancholy. "We were hoping Jesus was the Messiah who would set Israel free."

The stranger realized these grieving disciples got it half right. Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, but his brand of liberation was not of this world.

The stranger then became their teacher, taking them on a tour of the familiar passages of the Hebrew Scriptures reinterpreting them in the context of Jesus' crucifixion. "Don't you see?" the stranger was saying. "Your Messiah's death wasn't a defeat; instead it laid the groundwork for his greatest victory!"

At this point the three come to Emmaus, a village seven miles from Jerusalem. When the stranger continued to walk on ahead, the two begged him to stay. Obviously they hadn't had enough. They wanted more. So, they invited the stranger to supper.

Now, so far the story is very believable. Two men meet a third on the road, they walk and talk together about current events and their deepest spiritual concerns. The stranger, wise and knowledgeable, became their teacher and gave new meaning to the old familiar scriptures, causing the other two out of gratitude to offer hospitality. All very believable.

But here's where the story becomes so wonderfully unbelievable it can be nothing but believable. The stranger, the invited guest, taking on the role of host, blessed and broke the bread, then suddenly vanished but not until the two disciples recognized him.

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Their immediate response? “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was walking with us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

What they were describing to each other was a pre “Ah.ha!” moment. While walking and talking with Jesus their almost cold embers of faith began to burn and glow again. As the Stranger reinterpreted the scriptures their thinking process was rewired. Finally, when Jesus broke the bread, their eyes were opened allowing them to receive the gift of the resurrection faith. It all came together. Their grief and confusion transformed into joy and clarity. Now believing the unbelievable, it was back to Jerusalem to spread the Good News.

This story reaffirms the two main reasons God sent his only son into the world:

- 1) Christ came to die for our sins and be raised to new life so we can be forgiven and raised with him.
- 2) Christ came to teach us how to believe and live outside the box.

First Christ came to die for our sins. Throughout Lent and Holy Week the scriptures and sermons focused on God’s plan to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus, totally sinless and innocent, died in our place to satisfy God’s need for unconditional justice and reveal God’s unconditional love.

Second, Jesus came to teach us how to believe and live outside the box. Three years prior to Good Friday Jesus prepared his disciples for his crucifixion and resurrection by teaching them to free their faith and practice from old, tired patterns. Unfortunately, like the scribes and Pharisees, sometimes we are very unteachable. Comfortable with our preconceived notions about our faith and practice we can feel threatened when challenged to let God stretch our iron clad beliefs and habits. Like the Pharisees, we feel like going strictly by the book, leaving little room for the Spirit of God to show us how to believe and live outside the box.

That’s why what happened on the road to Emmaus is so important. The Stranger became their teacher revealing new and deeper levels of meaning in the old familiar scriptures, and as he taught they allowed him to test their preconceived notions.

But it was at the table when this Stranger turned Teacher then became their Lord. Breaking the bread broke down the final barrier to faith.

I’m sure if you think about it long enough you can remember your own Emmaus Road experience when your own faith was in tatters and your old coping mechanism could no longer handle your overwhelming grief and confusion. But suddenly someone walks with you, a friend, a coworker or a neighbor. You start talking about the scriptures and relearn old lessons as you begin to think and believe outside the old box you hemmed yourself into. You again sense the glow of your almost dead faith and suddenly you experience resurrection, maybe for the first time, maybe again for the first time. However you experience it Christ broke the bread, your eyes were opened and you recognized him.

This morning we will break bread together. Around this table we will remember Jesus’ crucifixion and claim his resurrection. It is here our eyes can be opened and spirits can be nourished through the body and blood of Christ as we enter the mystery of his death and resurrection.

What happens next? That’s up to you and me, but we should pay close attention to what those two disciples did. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, the place they

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were running away from, to join with the growing number of disciples who had seen Jesus so together they could believe and live outside the box.

Jesus came into the world to live for us, to die for us and be raised in power for us. Jesus taught us to believe and live outside the box, in Christian community. Living outside the box; Kingdom Living, living like Jesus, bringing healing and hope to people, being agents of truth and justice, learning to be peacemakers and knowing how to recognize Jesus in the broken bread and in broken lives.

Come to the table, open your eyes and see Jesus our Crucified and Risen Christ.