

# Sharing Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

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First Central Congregational UCC

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This year our congregation turns 160 years old. As part of the anniversary commemorations I've been preparing an edited version of the *Life and Labors of Rev. Reuben Gaylord* the founding pastor of the First Congregational Church. The book was written by his widow Mary Gaylord in 1889. Here's one of the vivid stories about early life on the frontier:

On Monday morning we took the train for Quincy, [Illinois] which then made regular connections at that place with the one daily passenger train on the Hannibal and St. Joe railroad for the city of St. Joseph [Missouri]. We were anxious to make these connections, expecting that a steamboat, which would take us home to Omaha, would wait at St. Joseph for the railroad passengers. It was a dark and rainy forenoon, and we were impatient with our slow progress. When we at last arrived at Quincy, it was to find that the other train, unwilling to wait longer, was well on its way. What could be done? We had our through ticket, but not money sufficient to go to a hotel. After walking up and down the long waiting room at the depot until weary, Mr. Gaylord decided, as a forlorn hope, to go into a bank and ask for money. He told his story in few words and requested the loan of ten dollars. He was an entire stranger, but wholly at variance with their usual practice, they put the money into his hands. During the night we were conscious of some excitement about the hotel, and the morning revealed the cause. The train, missed with so much sorrow, was waylaid in crossing Missouri by a party of bushwhackers. The one from the west was served in the same manner, and freight trains coming up shared a similar fate. All were robbed of whatever was valuable that could be carried away. Quantities of merchandise which could not be taken were tumbled on the ground to be broken up and destroyed as far as possible. Then a number of cars just sufficient to hold all the passengers, were placed by themselves and the rest set on fire. Into these saved cars were packed all the passengers from every direction, with nothing left but the clothes they were wearing, and started off for Quincy. It was some of those frightened and weary travelers coming into the hotel that night, that caused the commotion. Very thankful for the disappointment, which at first was so trying, we took the next day's train, soldiers being sent out with it as far as was deemed necessary. When the scene of the guerrilla's work was passed, the smoking ruins, the scattered and mutilated freight, made us still more grateful [of having missed] such a catastrophe. But as the train moved on, it came to a long ascending grade, and the one engine could only take a part of the cars. One half was left, and a thick forest was near, which might afford a rendezvous for bushwhackers. It was night and the darkness intense. Women were crying with fear, and children from weariness and

hunger. There were more passengers than seats, and we stood much of the time that others more needy might occupy our places. Mr. Gaylord tried to quiet and comfort the passengers, and seeing that we were calm, many gathered around us, thus affording an opportunity to point them to the kind Protector. But at last the engine returned, and we finally reached St. Joseph in safety. But the boat, the last one of the season to ascend the Missouri, had gone, and in a crowded stage coach, over roads rendered nearly impassable by recent rains, we accomplished the remaining 150 miles of our journey.

Mary Gaylord paints a vivid scene of the frightened passengers huddled in the train in the dark of night, as Rev. Gaylord attempts to console them with the calm assurances of faith. As a pastor I've never been in such a situation, yet routinely I do sit with individuals and families in the midst of crisis, trying to be a calm and assuring presence.

Brendan Byrne writes that the lesson we the church should learn from this story in the Gospel of Luke is "how to walk with the disillusioned and suffering of the world, hearing out their story, accepting their broken hopes." For in this story Jesus himself is the wounded healer, walking with these men, listening as they tell of their despair.

We can imagine these two fellows. Weeks before maybe they were filled with hope and anticipation as Jesus rode the colt down the Mount of Olives into the city of Jerusalem. They believed in Jesus' message of peace and salvation. They had overlooked his warnings and forebodings of what might happen in Jerusalem. Then, when Jesus was arrested, tried, and killed their world fell apart. Their hopes were dashed. Life lost its meaning. In the midst of confusion, anxiety, and fear, they decided to go home.

I've walked along the Emmaus Road. That's a common experience for pilgrims and tourists to Israel. There are evergreen trees lining the contemporary road. I recall the area being peaceful. That same day we visited the grave of the prophet Samuel and the valley in which the story says that David defeated Goliath. A rich and storied landscape.

I've also walked the Emmaus Road in that I've been like the men, in despair, depressed, anxious, confused. You've probably been there too.

And I've walked this road as the one accompanying those who are hurting. Vivid scenes jump to mind. Listening to a youth share the story of being raped. Comforting parents who learned of their child's eating disorder. Holding the woman's hand the moment she learns that her daughter has been murdered. Reading scripture as a man breathes his final breath.

Last autumn this congregation voted to declare ourselves WISE for Mental Health—a new certification from the United Church of Christ meaning that we are welcoming, inclusive, supporting, and engaged for mental health. In the WISE covenant we adopted we declared:

We the people of First Central Congregational United Church of Christ of Omaha, Nebraska know we are graced by the gifts, stories, and experiences of all our members, including those living with mental health challenges. We care about the whole person: body, heart, mind, and soul. We affirm the deep and constant movement of God's Holy Spirit, seeking to bring us to the fullness of life. We believe that all people are beloved by God, and if a person has a mental health challenge that person has a right to be seen

as a person first.

In other words, we committed to walking beside all people in their most trying moments.

When we adopted our WISE covenant last autumn, we were only the third church in the denomination to do so, and the first one after last summer's General Synod passed a resolution calling on churches to begin the process. Because of our pioneering spirit, the UCC's Mental Health Network has asked us to host their next conference, in May 2017 and to assist in developing and piloting the materials that congregations will use in the future in order to become WISE for Mental Health.

As Reuben Gaylord accompanied those early settlers through their dark and fearful nights, in the twenty-first century our congregation, always moving onward and upward, will continue to accompany people through the darkness.

Generally when we preach and teach this Emmaus story, we focus on the meal and not the journey along the road. We explore the connections with communion and how we can continue to experience the resurrected Christ in the breaking of bread and sharing a meal together.

Last autumn, one communion Sunday, Grant Switzer came first to be served, as he usually does, and when I said "The Bread of Life," Grant responded "Well, I hope so."

In the moment I realized that Grant's comment could be taken two ways. One an expression of confident faith, and probably the way Grant meant it. As if he was saying, "Well, what else would this be but the bread of life."

The other possible interpretation of his statement was as a question—"Is this really the Bread of Life?" I imagined what someone posing that question might think as they followed that train of thought. "What does he even mean when he says 'the Bread of Life?' How can this gluten-free cracker be the source of life and spiritual nurture? Are these words just the hocus pocus we tell ourselves?" You can imagine from there.

Again, I don't think this second, challenging meaning was what Grant was expressing that day, but his words left me pondering. In his statement was more than a fun story, there was an important theological question.

What do I mean when I say "The Bread of Life" or "The Cup of Salvation?"

I don't mean something magical. I don't believe that my prayer of institution invests these ordinary elements with magic. But I do pray for the Spirit of God to come upon them. Because I believe that God can take ordinary things and make them extraordinary, something I also proclaim with every baptism.

I also believe that this meal makes communion. The meal itself is not the communion. The meal isn't even just a symbol of communion. The meal creates the communion—the connection between us, between God, between all believers around the world, between believers through all the ages, the meal even connects us with all creation. There is a reality to this event which transcends the physical event while also being embodied by the physical event. And if I say much more I risk sounding like a metaphysician (which I actually am, by the way, my dissertation being on the topic of how physical and mental properties can both be

invested in the same event).

So, to draw these threads together. These are the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation because these are the bread and cup of communion. Communion which connects us to one another. The meal in Emmaus cannot be separated from the walk together along the road. With this ritual of communion we are pledging ourselves to accompany one another through the dark and difficult times.

That's what it means for us to share Jesus.