

I don't know about you, but I love this gospel story – *the road to Emmaus*. Here, in a few short paragraphs, Luke gives us a perfect illustration of what it means to walk the spiritual life with the risen Jesus, now better described as the *Christ*, the truly anointed one. Notice how the story starts with a reality we've all experienced, two people walking and talking, discussing some really bad news. The story tells us they were downcast, because you see, Jesus has disappointed them! He was supposed to redeem Israel, to make the world right, to bring happiness to all, and now he's dead. Oh, there is this rumor that he lives yet again, but that seems preposterous. Things are bleak.

Ever been there? Something bad has happened in your life, something quite horrible even. You've lost a job, a spouse, a child to drugs? Perhaps a debilitating illness has invaded your person, rocking your sense of yourself as a whole person. So you cry out, "Where are you, Jesus?" And...no answer. Bad connection perhaps. You try again. "Jesus? You there? I could sure use some of your help, right now. Hello?" A friend approaches and asks what's up. You reply, "I thought Jesus would come when I called, but he's not. I thought this religion stuff might help me, but I was misinformed. I guess the atheists are right."

On the road to Emmaus, a stranger approaches and politely enters the conversation between the two travelers. On hearing their dismay and skepticism, their sense of hopelessness, he shakes his head. Don't you see, he asks? Christ *had* to suffer, it was necessary. How else would he have any credibility as the Messiah? If the life of Jesus was all smooth roads, good food, choice wine, and all the comforts of the rich, who would possibly identify with him, let alone love him? Jesus entered the pain of the world and took it all the way to a rotten death on a cross – all the more horrible in that it was totally undeserved. His betrayal, torture, and death are as bad as it gets – whatever you're going through will not reach the level he endured. As he talks to the travelers, their hearts are stirred. Truth is like this – you know it at your gut level. Here's the interesting thing about that conversation – Jesus spends most of the time *re-educating* them. They thought they knew Jesus, but clearly they didn't. Don't fall into the same trap. Jesus is NOT what you think he is. He is so much more, always more.

In the year 2000, a prison chaplain serving the Chowchilla Women's Prison (show map), asked the women inmates a simple question, "What can be done to improve your lives?" He expected answers like "Get me out of here!" but that's not what was said. What they said was, "We want to see our children." So the chaplain asked them, "Why is this an issue?" Again he expected answers like, "My family has abandoned me. Or, my husband is keeping the kids away. Or, my kids are angry at me." But that's not what was said. What they said was, "They live too far away from here. It's too hard, too expensive, to make the journey." The chaplain was astounded. There must be a way. So he began to reach out to local charitable organizations and secured enough funding to organize a bus from Sacramento to the prison. The bus was jammed full of kids and adult supervisors. They drove to the prison, and the warden set up a visiting area in one of the cafeterias. The explosion of emotion – tears, laughter, screams of recognition, and hugs to match, was sufficient witness to make this an annual event. Of course, you must have

guessed which day the children come to visit, and have for the past 17 years? Yes, Mother's Day. On that day, an organization was formed, aptly named *Get on the Bus*.

There's a second aspect to today's Gospel reading that is easy to miss. Despite the teachings of Jesus that fire up their souls, the two travelers cannot recognize him. It is only when they sit together for a meal, when Jesus breaks the bread, that their eyes are opened. Luke makes this very clear in the story, and in case you missed it, restates it at the end. *He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread*. Simply enough, we are people of the Eucharist. Many times up here, I tell you stories that point out where and how to find Jesus. I know, as do many of you, that Jesus is found without fail in the poor, the imprisoned, the downtrodden, and the broken. But he is also found, again without fail, in the sacrament of the Eucharist. If you're having trouble finding Jesus in your life, come to Mass, receive the Eucharist, and *open your eyes*. Not in a literal sense, but in an experiential sense. Jesus will absolutely show you where he wants you to go next, if you simply *open your eyes*. You may not like what you see, or be reluctant to act, but it will be clear. The two travelers on the road were so awakened that they immediately returned to Jerusalem that very night, right back into the heart of things, right back into a dangerous situation. Their eyes were opened.

Chowchilla Women's Prison has about 2,900 inmates. The early success of Get on the Bus spawned other trips to other prisons as well. Fathers need to see their kids too. Yes, they're visited on Father's Day. The sad reality is that there are lot more fathers who need to see their kids than mothers, but let's not quibble. GOTB offers free transportation for the children and their caregivers to the prison, provides travel bags to the children, a photo of each child with his or her parent, and meals for the day (B,L,D, and snacks) all at no charge. They get to visit for 4 hours, and on the bus ride home each child receives a teddy bear with a letter from their parent and post-event counseling. GOTB has been absorbed into the Center for Restorative Justice Works and continues to serve inmates and families. They need money, they need volunteers to help on the bus, they need kind hearts and open minds. There are flyers on the table on the way out that I invite you to grab. Help if you can.

The gospel story is actually two journeys, the first a journey away from trouble, an escape, a journey taken in sadness and fear. The second journey is a return to the origin, a re-engagement with the pain, but now with a new reality, the presence of Jesus through his word and through the Eucharist. Many people ask me how I can keep going to the prison, and my answer is simple. I can only go because I get fed in between journeys! No, not my wife's home cooking (but that does help!) but through the Eucharist each and every week. To me, the Liturgy is not an obligation, it's a necessity! If you're asked why you have dinner each night, I doubt you'll answer that it's a moral obligation. You'd say that I'll starve, even die, if I don't eat. The Eucharist is the same. So, is Jesus asking you to return to something, now that he's fed you? What is that for you? What have you been running from, downcast and disappointed? What's burning in your heart right now? Maybe it's time to turn around.

Welcome to the Emmaus story, or should I say the road to Chowchilla? Emmaus was seven miles from Jerusalem. Chowchilla is 356 miles from Solana Beach. Jesus can be found on both journeys.