

Sermon: A life shattered and then restored

By now most of you probably know that I rarely give a straight answer to your questions or tell you what you should do. I don't often appear to give straight answers in my preaching, teaching, or spiritual direction; or at least I try not to. And the reason I don't do that is because I don't think the gospel does that.

Rarely does the gospel tell us what to do or believe. Rarely does it give us a straight answer. And today's gospel, the road to Emmaus story, is no different. It doesn't give us answers. It raises questions and invites reflection. It's a map by which we orient and find ourselves. It reveals intersections of Jesus' life and our lives. It begs to be recognized as a story about our lives, and it is a story with which we are familiar. It is a story of shattering and restoration.

If your life has ever been shattered, then this is your story. If your life has ever been restored, then this is your story. And if you've ever been in that in between place, between shattering and restoration, then this is your story as well.

Within this story is a pattern or template that describes the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back to Jerusalem. It's a journey Cleopas and his companion take and it's a journey each of us have taken, is currently taking, or will eventually take. It's not, however, a one-time journey. It's a journey we take repeatedly in our lives.

I am not talking about Jerusalem and Emmaus as particular geographical locations. I am talking about them as representative realities. They are portals into a greater self-awareness and spaces through which we see a greater fullness of God, ourselves, each other, and the world.

There is a Jerusalem within us and an Emmaus within us, and both get enacted in our lives. That's also true for the breaking of the bread. It also is typical. It might point to and remind us of the Communion, but the Communion reality is bigger and more expansive than what we do here on Sunday mornings.

Have you ever felt like you just had to get away? Or felt like life had given you more than you could handle? Have you ever run away from life? Have you ever been deeply disappointed? Have you lived with unmet expectations?

When have you felt lost, as if your world had been turned upside down? Have you ever wrestled with those big questions: “Who am I now? What’s next? Where do I go? What do I do?”

Can you remember a time when you did everything right and life still didn’t work out the way you planned or wanted? Have you grieved the death of a loved one, a dream, an identity, a future? Has your life ever been shattered? If so, then you know what it’s like to be Cleopas and his companion.

It’s Easter morning and the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem. Who can blame them? Jerusalem is a place of pain, sorrow, and loss. It’s a place of death, unmet expectations, and disappointment. It’s a place where their lives were shattered. No one wants to stay in that place. I sure don’t, do you? As they walk, they are talking about all the things that happened, and I suspect, all the things that didn’t happen.

They are talking about [Jesus’ arrest, torture, crucifixion, and death](#). They are talking about hope that didn’t materialize, expectations that were unmet, investments that paid no return. They are disappointed and sad. They had hoped Jesus was the one, but he’s dead. And there’s a part of them that’s been lost, a part of them that died with Jesus. They had heard rumors that [he was alive](#) but it all sounded like an “idle tale”. There was nothing to keep them in Jerusalem. Their lives had been shattered.

I don’t know why they chose to go to Emmaus, but I’ve known times when I just wanted to get away, when any place was better than where I was. Any place would be better than Jerusalem.

Emmaus is our escape from life. Or so we think. What we don’t know at the time, and what Cleopas and his companion did not know, is that it is also the way back to life. That realization happened for the two disciples, as it does for us, in the breaking of the bread.

It wasn't an escape from life that took them to Emmaus, but a hunger for life. It wasn't brokenness that took them to Emmaus but a hunger for wholeness. It wasn't a shattering that took them to Emmaus, but a hunger for restoration.

Hunger is more than physical, it also spiritual and emotional. We are by nature hungry. We hunger for life, love, wholeness, community, meaning, purpose. That hunger is surely the reason they strongly urged Jesus, "Stay with us." Jesus would not only stay, but he would also feed them. The guest they invited to their table would become their host.

"When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." They recognized him as the one they had left for dead in Jerusalem. They recognized him as the one who had accompanied them on the road to Emmaus. They recognized him as the one they had hoped he would be.

Jesus wasn't just giving them bread; he was giving them back themselves. This was their restoration. When Jesus broke the bread something in them broke open. With that breaking open their lives were being put back together. So, it is for us as well. We've all had times when our lives were broken open in ways we could never imagine or have done for ourselves.

Despite how it feels, our brokenness is not an ending. There is more to it than we often see or know. It is not just brokenness, a shattering, it is a breaking open to new life, to new seeing, to new recognition, to community, welcome, hospitality, and love. Isn't that why we gather not only in this sanctuary, but around the fellowship table every Sunday? Isn't that our unspoken desire for the time and food that we share with each other?

Jesus fed them not just with bread but with himself: with his body, his life, his love, his compassion, his strength, his forgiveness, his hope, with all that he is and all that he has. Their life was being restored in their being broken open. But as soon as they saw and recognized Jesus "he vanished from their sight."

Where do you think he went? Was he abandoning them? Was he playing games with them, “Now you see me, now you don’t?” Was he undoing everything that just happened?

No, I don’t think that it wasn’t anything like that. He was no longer before them because he was now within them. Jesus was the burning heart within them, and it had been there all along. Sometimes that burning is felt as brokenness, sometimes as hunger, or being broken open, and other times as deep joy and gratitude. Always, it is Jesus.

And “that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem.”

They returned to the place from which they had to get away from. Jerusalem is not only the place of death it is also the place of life. It is not only a place of sorrow, but also a place of joy. It is not only a place of shattering, but also a place of restoration.

Cleopas and his companion arrive with news of their Emmaus experience only to hear that Jesus was alive, seen, and present in Jerusalem.

We leave Jerusalem to return to Jerusalem: to face our deaths, losses, and shattered lives. In so doing we discover that life awaits us. We return to reclaim ourselves, to recover the lost pieces of ourselves. The city hasn’t changed but we have.

Shattered lives, broken bread, restored lives. Jerusalem, Emmaus, Jerusalem. That seems to be the pattern. It’s never, however, as simple or easy as it sounds. It’s one thing to name the pattern but another to live it. It takes time and effort. It’s not easy and it’s painful. It means trusting that somehow the shards of our lives will become the pieces for a new life, a new seeing, a new way of living.

Given where I started this sermon you won’t be too surprised when I say that I have no answer for you. I am not going to tell you what to do. Instead, I have some questions.

- Where do you see this pattern in your life? How have you experienced it?

- Are you leaving Jerusalem? In Emmaus? On the way? Returning to Jerusalem?
- In what ways has your life been shattered? Is it in pieces today?
- What is your deepest hunger? What are you running toward?
- What is your Jerusalem today? Is it a place of sorrow and loss or is it a place of life and restoration?
- Where is your Emmaus? What do you need from Emmaus today?
- How do you imagine the lives of these two disciples to now be different? How would you like your life to be different?
- What in you, in your present circumstances, is being or needs to be restored and put back together?

There are no right or wrong answers to those questions. There is only your answer. Whatever your answers might be, they describe the intersection of Jesus' life and your life. Shattering, breaking open, and restoring are all places of that intersection. They were for the two disciples in today's gospel, and they are for us as well.

Jesus was in Jerusalem before Cleopas and his companion ever left. He was with them on the road to Emmaus. He was in the breaking of the bread. And he was already in Jerusalem when they returned. Do you know what those intersections are called?

They are called the gifts of God for the people of God. Amen