

Sermon for Sunday, August 15, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE STRANGER IN OUR CAR"

St. Luke 24:13-35

Text: "While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus drew near and went with them." --St. Luke 24:15

Practically speaking, Jesus just hadn't worked out. When Simon and Cleopas first began to believe in him, they had been tremendously excited. They had listened to his teachings and been amazed; they had watched the crowds respond to him and their own hearts had been deeply touched. But, in the end, things had not worked out as they expected or wanted. Now they turned their backs on Jerusalem and started to Emmaus. Perhaps there were other goals they might work for, other dreams they might dream, new ideals they might discover. Perhaps in Emmaus--or beyond--or tomorrow--or the day after that--something or someone would come along with a new dream or a fresh vision that would give hope to their troubled world.

A lot of people are turning their backs on Jerusalem and Jesus these days. Practically speaking, Jesus just hasn't worked out. Some of them may be friends of yours. There was a time when they were active in the church or when they would talk with you about Jesus. But not any more. They don't go to church now; they change the subject these days when you talk about the Lord. And there are a lot of them--particularly among our young people. For example, the United Presbyterian Church has lost over 600,000 members in the past 8 years. And in our own denomination, we have fewer members now than we did ten years ago--and that in a time when the southland where we are principally located has experienced a great population increase.

Actually, this may be happening to you. Maybe you are discovering that Jesus isn't very practical in the kind of a world we live in today. Maybe you are discovering that when you have some particular needs, Jesus doesn't seem to meet them. And it may be that your own ties to the church have loosened and you discover that perhaps you are in the process of turning your back on Jerusalem and Jesus. As a pastor, I see this happen so often--someone hears about Jesus and gets pretty excited. They believe, they make a commitment, and then things don't work out the way they had expected. Their enthusiasm begins to dim, their love for Jesus to wane, and soon they are off down some Emmaus road, turning their backs on Jesus and Jerusalem, looking for some new hope, some new vision, some new thrill. There was a man in the Bible like that. His name was Demas. In the little book of Philemon, St. Paul writes of him and says, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers." (Philemon 23,24) Yet, a few years later, St. Paul writes to Timothy and this is what he says, "Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me..." (II Tim. 4:9, 10)

Yes, Demas turned his back on Jesus; Simon and Cleopas set out for Emmaus that day and they turned their backs on Jesus and Jerusalem. And there are a lot of people today doing the same thing. Those two men on the road to Emmaus, Simon and Cleopas, are like a lot of us.

Notice first that they made the mistake of trying to use Jesus. The renowned Bible scholar, William Barclay, writes, "They wished to use him for their own purposes and to mold him to their own dreams. They looked for a Messiah who would be king and

conquerer, who would set his foot on the eagle's neck and drive the Romans from Palestine, who would change Israel from a subject nation to a world power." Yes, "What a king he'd make!" thought the crowd. "Let's harness his power to our plans and our purposes." Are you guilty of that? Do you catch yourself trying to use Jesus to fit your goals and plans? I know I'm guilty. I make all kinds of plans and set all sorts of goals for myself. And then I ask Jesus to bless them and make them turn out the way I want. Some of my liberal preacher friends are guilty of that. They have a vision of what the world ought to be like and of what should be done to make it like their dream--and then they try to use religion and Jesus to accomplish their goals. I suspect most of us are guilty of trying to use Jesus.

Yes, Simon and Cleopas made a mistake in trying to use Jesus. Instead of asking, "How can I use Jesus?" they should have been asking, "How can Jesus use me?" Are you asking yourself that question? If not, you may be turning your back on Jerusalem and Jesus.

The second mistake Simon and Cleopas made was in failing to understand what was really important. And what about you? What is really important today in your opinion? What things are shaping the courses of human history? Look at the sort of choices they had to make. On the one hand, imagine a simple Jewish carpenter sitting in a rowboat talking to a group of poor, subjected people--and imagine him a little later hanging from a criminal's cross. Now, compare that to the might and power of the Roman empire and the legions of Rome. Which of those two would you judge to be most important? Or again, what would you think of an itinerant Jew standing on a street corner in the market place of Athens talking about another Jew who had been crucified? Would you have guessed that his preaching would shatter the Greek world of learning and culture? Would you have guessed that day that what he said would shatter paganism and turn the very Pantheon itself into a Christian church for centuries to come? And again, in the 5th century, which event would you have considered to be more important: Alaric's sacking of the city of Rome in 410 that would bring on the Dark Ages, or a book written three years later by a humble monk names Augustine--a book entitled, The City of God? Yet, as a matter of fact, it was Augustine's book--and not the bands of barbarians--that controlled and shaped the world during the Middle Ages. Or what about 18th century England with revolution brewing across the channel in France and threatening their own land? Would you have given much thought to a simple man who stood in the open fields to preach to whoever would listen? Would we not have cried out, "Come down to earth, John Wesley. Look at the problems that face our world! Be relevant to the real issues." Yet, Lecky, the historian, wrote that it was the Wesleyan revival that saved England and which shaped the course of the western world for decades to come.

I suppose you can't blame Simon and Cleopas too much. When they watched the Romans crucify Jesus they couldn't imagine that it would be the single most important event in the course of human history. And what about the world today? What is really important? Is it who we elect president in November? Is it our space probe to Mars? Is it the race issue, the poverty issue, the population explosion, the threat of famine that faces the world? Yes, what is really important in 1976? Could the single most important thing happening today be Billy Graham preaching to a crowd in a football stadium--or some quiet and holy person who this very moment is writing some book--or perhaps the life of some young person listening to my voice right now?

Yes, it is hard to know what is truly important--except for one thing. Always

before it has turned out that the most important thing going on in any age has somehow been related to Jesus.

Then the third thing I would call to your attention is that something odd occurred on the road to Emmaus. As it turned out, Jesus was not a broken dream lying in ruins in a Jerusalem tomb. He too was on the road to Emmaus--the road to the future--the road to tomorrow. As our text puts it, "Jesus himself drew near and went with them..." There was a stranger in their midst, for the Bible says they did not know him. Yet, as they traveled with Jesus they described it this way, "did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road...?"

As you travel life's road this morning, is there a stranger in your car? There are a lot of people on life's road today who are looking for something to give meaning to life, to give them a burning heart, to give them something worthwhile to which they can give their lives. So many of us are looking for something to give meaning to life. Dr. Rollo May, the psychologist, has said that the main problem with most of the patients who come to him in the middle of the 20th century is, "a vague sense of undirectedness." Carl Jung claimed that the "central neurosis of our time is emptiness." Dr. Erich Fromm sighs that we have produced "men that act like machines and machines that act like men." Dr. Victor Frankl of Vienna once said, "Time and time again, the psychiatrist is consulted by patients who doubt that life has any meaning."

Much of modern literature testifies to this sense of meaninglessness. Samuel Beckett in his play, Waiting for Godot, writes that life is "an indefinite waiting for an explanation that never comes." Or, as John Osborne, one of Britain's angry young men, expresses it in his play, Look Back in Anger, "I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the 30's and 40's when we were still kids. There aren't any good brave causes left. If the big bang comes, and we all get killed off..It'll just be for the Brave, New Nothing--very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus."

Yes, is there some stranger in our midst who can give meaning to life, who can give us burning hearts? In J.D. Salinger's book, Catcher in the Rye, the central character is a young man named Holden Caulfield. Holden, on the verge of flunking out of his New England prep school, disappointed with his executive father and socialite mother, who have no time for him, and convinced that his teachers, the preachers, and all of society are "phonies," leaves school and takes off for New York City for a lost weekend. He tries to get drunk, but only succeeds in getting sick. He calls a prostitute to his room, but is so disgusted with himself that he can't go through with it. Finally, he starts home to his family's midtown apartment. On the way he crosses Central Park and hears some children singing an old Scottish folk song, "coming through the rye." At home he finds his seven-year-old sister, who in her childish simplicity seems to him to be the only real person in the world. He tries to tell her something of his experience and recounts the song the children were singing. "If a body catch a body..." he begins. "No," corrects his sister, "Its 'if a body kiss a body.'" Holden says to her, "I thought it was 'if a body catch a body,'" And then he adds, "Anyway, I keep picturing all of these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around--nobody big, I mean--except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff, I mean if they are running and they don't look where they're going, I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all

I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy." Well, maybe it isn't so crazy after all, for Holden Caulfield was looking for something to give meaning to life.

And I suppose as we travel down life's road Holden Caulfield, you and I are all wondering if somewhere, someplace there isn't something or someone worth committing ourselves to--something that will give meaning to life and make our hearts burn within us. There is a stranger in our midst--his name is Jesus. He won't let you use him and looking back on our times history will show that the most important things that happened were somehow related to him. But if you will put your life in his hands at the end you can look back and say, "Did not our hearts burn within us?"

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