

“Strangers in the Night”

Luke 24:13-35

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Stone Mountain, Georgia

April 7, 2002

Jackie’s dad died two years ago. He had been a part of my life for over thirty years. Like his own children, I loved and appreciated him for many reasons.

One thing I wanted prior to visitation at the funeral home was time alone in the chapel. I wanted to thank God for giving me such a fine father-in-law and spend some time alone processing my grief. I arrived about thirty minutes before anyone else, or so I thought. I had been in the chapel only minutes when a stranger walked in. Immediately, he started talking about everything from the weather to his association with Mr. Blair. Needless to say, my quiet time was anything but quiet and my need to process my grief was delayed. The last thing I wanted or needed that afternoon was to make small talk with a stranger but that’s what I ended up doing.

I wonder if the two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt the same way as they traveled home from Jerusalem after the crucifixion of Jesus? Their hearts were broken because their dreams were shattered. The one they loved and placed their hopes in for a brighter future had been tortured and killed. What a horrible weekend it had been.

Luke said they talked to one another as they walked. No doubt they were trying to make sense of the senseless and console each other. Each step and word had to be a struggle, though. Processing grief always is.

While walking that lonely road, they were joined by a stranger. Actually, he seemed more an intruder than a stranger. He started talking to them as if he knew nothing about the events that occurred on Good Friday or their need to be alone.

He prodded them to tell him what happened in Jerusalem that had them so despondent. After they told him, he began quoting Moses and the prophets and tying the events of the weekend to ancient, holy writings.

When the two disciples approached their home, they invited this stranger to be their guest for the night. Evidently, he was less of an intruder at this point than he had previously been. It was during the evening meal that their eyes were opened and they realized the stranger in their midst was Jesus, the risen Lord. Upon realizing this, they left their home and ran back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples what happened.

While there are many lessons to be learned from this story, the most important for me today is this. **God will not leave us alone when we are hurting and grieving.** He will find us and draw near to us hoping that we will let Him help us process our grief and move beyond it.

To say these two disciples were hurting would be an understatement. *“We had hoped,” they told the stranger, “that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”*

Burying a dream is hard, isn’t it? I can think of nothing harder to do. So hard is it that some people quit dreaming. They cannot stand the thought of being disappointed again.

These two disciples had gotten their hopes up one more time, though. This man called Jesus was different from other crusaders. *As they said, “He was a prophet powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.”* He taught as no man had ever

taught and performed miracles no mortal could duplicate. Surely, this was the long awaited Messiah and the time to redeem Israel was at hand.

Yet, he must not have been. No anointed of God would endure what he did and be crucified like a common criminal.

Yes, it was a long and lonely trek back to Emmaus because they were walking on shards of shattered dreams that cut with each step. God knew this. That's why Jesus found them and walked along side them.

God will not leave us alone when we are hurting and grieving. Why? He will come because He is a parent who wants to love His children.

I have three children. Which one do I love the most? If I may borrow a line from someone else, "I love the most the one who is hurting."

Try to keep a responsible parent away from a child when that child is in pain. I dare you. It is almost impossible. Why? Because it is instinctual. Part of what it means to be a parent is to be with your children when they are hurting. You may not even be able to do anything to alleviate their pain, but you want to be there to help them carry it.

Why does God search for us when we are hurting and grieving? Why does God draw near when our dreams have been shattered? He is a parent who loves His children and must be with them.

Two weeks ago, we buried one of our finest members, Vess Howington. For many years, Vess was a professional firefighter for Atlanta. His daughter, Janie, told us that she had only seen her dad cry three times. Two occurred when family members died, his son, Gordon, and wife, Edith. The third occurred the day he had to hold a father and keep him from running into a burning house to rescue his wife and children. Vess knew there was no hope of retrieving them alive and trying to do so would cost this man his life, too.

Every parent wants to be with his children when they are in danger or are hurting. We get this from God. No wonder He finds us when we are hurting and grieving.

God will also come to us because He is a parent who wants to teach His children. Another part of parenting is teaching. A wise parent is a good counselor who listens to his children and sheds light on their situation. He takes the blinders off his child so he or she can see clearer and farther.

When Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, what is one thing he did? He helped them to see the crucifixion as they never had. He listened as they unburdened their hearts. Then, he explained the events of that weekend as God's plan for the ages as revealed through Moses and the prophets. He helped them understand that the crucifixion may have represented the end of their dreams, but not God's. It was actually the beginning of a whole new way of thinking and living.

It worked. They listened and understood things that had been hidden from them all their lives. As a result, this new understanding breathed new life in them and caused them to run back to Jerusalem that very night to share what they had seen and learned with other disciples.

When people are hurting, I encourage them to spend more time in meditation and prayer. I give them permission to unburden their hearts, express their emotions and ask their questions. Then, I encourage them to search the scriptures and open their minds. I challenge them to sit quietly and allow God to respond to them. He will and His response will give understanding and direction.

Finally, God will come to us because He is a parent who wants to encourage His children. Do you think the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were encouraged after having been with the risen Lord? Of course they were. You cannot help but notice all the contrasts when you read this story. They go from walking to running, being downcast to being exuberant, from cynics to believers, from being skeptical to being certain and feeling hopeless to abounding with assurance.

What a difference Jesus made in their lives. What a difference he can make in ours. However, I would be remiss if I did not tell you one of the most important parts of this story. None of this change would have occurred in their lives had they not invited him into their home for the night. Luke even said that Jesus was prepared to go on his way until they “strongly” urged him to join them for a meal and lodging. It was after they did this that their eyes were opened and they realized who was in their midst.

Are you ready to let God be a parent to you? There is no doubt you need Him. This is not even debatable. Are you ready to let Him love you, teach you and encourage you? I hope so and so does He.