

Slide 1

Encountering the Living Christ

Acts 9:3-9, Luke 24: 13-16, 28-35

Slide 2

One of my favorite activities is to travel by car. There's no place I'd rather be than on the road, much more as the driver than as the passenger, but whatever the case may be, I love being on the road. The majority of my travels involve a map, a full tank of gas, good music on the stereo, and kilometers after kilometers of open road. In fact, I consider a good trip on the road as a little glimpse of heaven.

Slide 3

I am not alone with this passion. I am sure many of you have your own road trip stories, be it by car, by plane, by boat, by bicycle, or even by foot. A large part of the history of civilizations is associated with travels, and the majority of these took place on the road.

Slide 4

So, as I thought about today's stories from the scripture, the Emmaus Road and the Damascus Road, my own love of the road caused that very aspect of the story to stick out to me.

Slide 5

In North American culture, the road looms most romantically as a symbol of freedom, of not being tied down to responsibilities, of the ability to follow one's

passions wherever they might lead. To be on the road is to be in motion—even if we do not know where we are going.

Slide 6

In addition to freedom, the road has also come to symbolize the space of quest, the place of longing, the place where we go to find ourselves. Frequently, the road serves as an intermediary space, as the edge of society one must traverse in order to transition to another stage of life. Being on the road necessitates an open-mindedness, a willingness to see new things or hear new ideas. When you are on the road, you are somehow outside of the familiar routines, beyond the reach of the ordinary. Time itself loses its meaning and relevance. I think it's all of these things—freedom, discovery, openness—that contribute to the lure of the road in our society. The great home of the soul is the Open Road. The road suspends the ordinary in such a way that the extraordinary is revealed. I think it is also why the road is so often God's chosen meeting place.

Let us turn to our texts for today.

Slide 7

Our first passage is found in Luke 24.13-16. There we read:

¹³And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. ¹⁵While

they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. ¹⁶But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.

Slide 8

And then in Luke 24.28-35 we read:

²⁸And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther.

²⁹But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them.

³⁰When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them.

³¹Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight.

³²They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"

³³And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, ³⁴saying, "The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon."

³⁵They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.

Slide 9

Our second passage is found in Acts 9.3-9, where we read:

³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

⁴and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

⁹And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Slide 10

In Luke 24.13-16, we find our first pair of travelers on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, returning home after a week in the holy city. We can assume they were on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover, and that they had witnessed the dramatic events unfolding—they had seen first hand the soaring hopes surrounding this man Jesus, and watched the dream crumble as their hero ended up tortured, instead of triumphant, crucified instead of conquering.

And then, that very morning, the women reported that they had visions of angels who said he was alive.

What a long, strange trip indeed!

Slide 11

On the return road, their souls sought to make sense of it all. And what happened to them on the road home?

Christ appeared and walked beside them, explaining the scriptures to them and breaking bread with them.

When they recognized him, their hearts burned within them.

Out on the road, they found clarity, they found freedom, and they found God. Or, rather, God found them.

Slide 12

And what about Saul on the road to Damascus? Unlike the travelers on the Emmaus Road, Saul seemed to know right where he was going. He was confident in his own righteousness, and he refused to admit the slightest bit of confusion or curiosity. For him, the road was narrow, and those followers of Jesus had strayed from it. His duty was clear: go to Damascus to round them up for trial. But even his soul, out there on the road, was somehow penetrable, somehow vulnerable—and while he was on the road God came to him.

Although the term applies, it just seems too gentle to refer to this as Saul's "moment of clarity." The author describes it as a blinding flash of light and a voice from the heavens. Such emphasis must have been required to get stubborn Saul's attention. He was struck blind and ordered to stop persecuting Jesus' followers. And the scriptures tell us he did so, immediately.

Out on the road, Saul who became Paul found grace and found himself. And God definitely tracked him down.

Slide 13

These two stories are stories of the resurrection, but stories of what took place on the road. For those of us who take the stories of the Bible seriously, these stories of resurrection, from the empty tomb to doubting Thomas to Emmaus and Damascus, these stories present us with some of the most challenging aspects of our faith. While many of us continue to harbor some doubts about the literal resurrection of the body, we hold fast to our belief that the disciples did experience something marvelous following Jesus' death. Despite doubts about what exactly the resurrection was, I remain convinced that without it, Christianity is meaningless. So, we need to investigate these resurrection stories.

Slide 14

On Easter Sunday, the disciples and the women, those who knew Jesus intimately, are seen at the empty tomb proclaiming that Christ was alive. This was a revolutionary act of defiance, daring to declare life where only death was apparent. But the stories we are considering today are different, and they add another layer to the Resurrection message.

Unlike the earlier stories of the resurrection, Christ does not appear to those who knew the man Jesus, like the disciples and the women. While we do not know much about Cleopas and his companion, the very fact that they had to return to

Jerusalem to notify the eleven disciples tells us that they themselves were not part of the inner circle of those who followed Jesus.

Yet, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Christ's presence in their midst.

Slide 15

And Paul himself never laid eyes on the man Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh; he never heard him preach, he never saw Jesus heal someone or perform a miracle, and he never witnessed the events in Jerusalem. And yet, he claims that he did actually meet Christ—the resurrected one, on the road to Damascus. Paul testifies to this experience in his own words in his letter to the Galatians (1:16), saying:

“The gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ... God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”

Paul met Christ on the Damascus road, though he had never laid eyes on Jesus of Nazareth.

Slide 16

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg is the one who identified this distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus.

The pre-Easter Jesus was the man of Nazareth, who was born, who lived and who died, who was known in and bound by the earthly realities of time and space.

Slide 17

The post-Easter Jesus, on the other hand, incorporates all the Christian tradition about the divine purposes and manifestations of Christ.

But Borg goes further—the post-Easter Jesus is not just a matter of Christian tradition and Christian doctrines. The post-Easter Jesus, he says, is “an element of experience.” He continues, “Beginning with Easter, the early movement continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way. After Easter, his followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space, as Jesus of Nazareth had been. Rather, Jesus as the risen, living Christ could be experienced anywhere and everywhere.” Let me say that again:

“Jesus as the risen, living Christ could be experienced anywhere and everywhere.”

This is the meaning of the Resurrection!

Slide 18

What Paul, Cleopas and the other traveler on the road to Emmaus testify to is a post-Easter Jesus, a living Christ who comes to them even if they have never known the earthly man of Nazareth.

This post-Easter Jesus met them right where they were, on the road. In these resurrection stories they experienced the sure knowledge that the truth and reality of Jesus is not limited by time or place, but exists with them, wherever they travel.

Slide 19

These two accounts take the resurrection experience on the road—into a place that is boundless and timeless and free—because the resurrection itself is God’s way of telling us that Christ’s presence is boundless, timeless and free. That means that if Paul and Cleopas and the other traveler can encounter the living Christ, so can we.

If Christ can be on the road to Emmaus and the road to Damascus, then Christ can also be present right here on any of the roads that we travel today, even right here in your own city.

Slide 20

That is why Christianity without the resurrection is meaningless—because the resurrection signals our participation in a living faith, a Christ we ourselves can encounter and experience.

We do not worship a God who acted one time, long ago, by sending a heavenly being to do mystical things. We worship the living Christ of faith, who comes to us even now, revealing to us the presence of God and the path to eternal life.

We worship a God who meets up with us, on our road, and that makes all the difference. The travelers to Emmaus, when they had met Christ on the road, turned around and ran all the way back to Jerusalem, they ran into danger, they ran into uncertainty, because their hearts were on fire with the light of life.

Paul, after meeting Christ on the Damascus road, turned around from ardent persecutor to ardent prophet. His heart too burned within him.

Slide 21

Because Christ, the post-Easter Jesus, is alive and comes to meet even us on our road, we too can live with hearts burning within us.

Slide 22

Indeed, we must live as Easter people, resurrection people.

What does that mean? The best description of resurrection people I know comes from another writer, Jack Kerouac. In his classic book titled *On the Road*, he says, “The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous fireworks exploding like spiders across the stars.”

Slide 23

Let us, then, be the mad ones—mad for life, our hearts burning within us, lighting up the world like fabulous fireworks, proclaiming for one and all that Christ is alive and that He is with us now, and that He will meet us on whatever road we may be. *Alleluia!*

Slide 24

Evidently, the question that remains is the following: “Who is Jesus?”

In relationship to chemistry, He is the One Who changed water into wine.

In relationship to biology, He was conceived supernaturally.

In relationship to physics, He refuted the law of gravity in ascending to the heavens.

In relationship to economics, He refuted the law of diminishing returns by feeding 5000 men with two fish and five small loaves.

In relationship to medicine, He healed the sick and the blind without any pills.

In relationship to history, He is the beginning and the end.

In relationship to government, He said that he would be called Counselor, Marvelous and Prince of Peace.

In relationship to religion, He affirmed that no one could come to the father but through Him.

Slide 25

So, who is Jesus?

He is the greatest man in history.

He did not have any servants, yet people called in “Lord.”

He did not have any diplomas, yet people called Him “Master.”

He did not use any medicine, yet people called Him “Healer.”

He did not have any army, yet kings were afraid of Him.

He did not win any war, yet he conquered the world.

He did not commit any crime, yet He was crucified.

He was placed in a tomb, yet He is alive even today.

Slide 26

It is an honor for me to serve such a One Who loves us so.

Do you believe in God and His Son Jesus? . . .