

## Resurrection Has a Place: The Road

*A sermon preached on Luke 24:13-35 on Sunday, April 26, 2026,  
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

It was billed as “A Walk to Remember,” this journey through the spots and stops that punctuate the history of First Baptist on Fifth. A bunch of us gathered yesterday for it, starting at the corner of 2nd and Church where our first church house stood. Tucked in the shade, we circled around our church historian, Paul, and heard the stories of our humble beginnings: how that first church house spilled right into the second one nearby, how the church moved west and dreamt of a grand space in which we now sit.

But as we walked, I kept thinking of these ancestors, the ones who built the church as we know it to be, even if or when they didn’t live to see it through. Carlos told us of Alfred Holland, our founder who memorably put an ad in the paper asking if there were any other Baptists in Winston, but then had a heart attack while tending his hogs and never saw the first church house completed. We heard of Dee Rich and B. F. Huntley, who financed and furnished much of this space, and both died before it was all complete. As I walked, I thought of all who have loved and served our church, who longed to see its new life but didn’t, or couldn’t, or wouldn’t. For me, it became a Road called Memory.

### II.

Or maybe we’ll call it the “But We Had Hoped” Road.<sup>1</sup> You know that road, and not just the way through town. You know it. I know it. We’ve traveled it, every one. It has wound through our years, carving a path of pain

---

<sup>1</sup> With gratitude for Debie Thomas and her beautiful sermon, “But We Had Hoped,” which inspired this opening. *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, p194.

through the landscape of our lives. *We had hoped* the marriage would look different. *We had hoped* the tumors wouldn't have spread. *We had hoped* election night wouldn't have ended this way. *We had hoped* the tingling in the fingers indicated something fixable, not terminal. *We had hoped* the dream wouldn't have died with a whimper and a burden. *We had hoped* for peace and not war, a bright future instead of the dark present. *We had hoped* this life would look different from the way it does.

We know that long and winding road, for it's the road of walking away amidst the wreckage, the road sometimes we can't even see through our tears. Where the road takes us is but a mystery, but so is the realization that sometimes we don't even recognize we're on it in the first place.

That was their road, though they may not have known it either. It took them some seven miles northwest of Jerusalem to a small village. History has forgotten where Emmaus was, but the road there is what lasts. A two hour walk in the best of circumstances, and on that night of the third day in which it all changed, Cleopas and his friend found themselves on that particular journey. They had heard the unbelievable report from the tomb in the mouths of women that morning, but did not yet know it in "the marrow of their soul."<sup>2</sup> Even this news of resurrection didn't erase the loss and disappointment, for there was so much they had longed for in Jesus. They expected a fulfillment of the promises made by God to the people of Israel, and liberation from the ruthless grip of Rome, and for all things to be made right. So they set out on the open road to try to begin to make sense of what had happened in the city,

---

<sup>2</sup> Evocative phrase here from Shannon Michael Pater, "Luke 24:13-35," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p422.

an open road with room enough for their boundless grief and shattered illusions about all that is and will be.<sup>3</sup>

It was dusk as they journeyed, Cleopas and the unnamed disciple — unnamed, perhaps, so that we can fill in that blank with Gary or Meredith or David or Steve or Norah or Ann. And along the way, they were met with a stranger, one for whom ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing.’ “How extraordinary to have eyes like that,” Frederick Buechner says, “eyes that look out at this world we live in but, more often than not, see everything except what matters most.”<sup>4</sup> The stranger asked them about their sorrowful conversation only to hear the first-century version of “where in the heck have you been, man? Are you the *only* person in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard about what happened?” Cleopas then tells him the story of Jesus, a story laced with despair over this One whose life and witness threatened the powerful, one who was tried and crucified, one who now some in their fellowship claim to have risen from the dead. “We had hoped!,” they said. “*We had hoped* that he was the one to redeem Israel,” he said, speaking for the ancient ache of dashed hopes and unmet expectations echoing throughout the generations before and since in ways that you and I instantly recognize.

Then that stranger began to illuminate the scripture for them, calling them to remember. Upon their invitation as they arrived to Emmaus at dusk, they begged him, “stay with us!” He did, and after the long journey as they gathered around the table, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Luke says: ‘then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him,’

---

<sup>3</sup> William J. O’Malley, SJ has a beautiful description of the road in his essay, “Very Early Sunday Morning,” from *All Shall Be Well: Readings for Lent and Easter*, p307.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner’s sermon on this text, “The Secret in the Dark,” is truly extraordinary. From *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, p254.

even as Jesus vanished from their sight. Hearts burning, eyes watering, souls lifting their spirits, they could not sit still and immediately returned the two hours back to Jerusalem. *For they had seen the Lord!*

### III.

This story is what you might call a preacher's playground – so meaty, and so much here to unpack. But among all the resurrection truth this story proclaims, I love that it asserts that there's something transformative about meeting Jesus on the road. Not just going to the table or to the word to find him, though he always meets us there too, but actually finding him with us on the road – knowing him from his quiet companionship, enjoying his presence beside us, brushing arms and trading stories and deepening in love and understanding with each and every step. There he is on the Road called Discovery and on all our roads, no matter their names: on the way to Emmaus or Damascus, on I-40 or the path to healing, or the road to sobriety or self-acceptance, or the highway of learning, parenting, working, caregiving, retiring, becoming who God dreams us to be.

Like the disciples, these roads can challenge us, cause us to examine and reexamine ourselves. They may even lead us to turn around and run right back to where we've come from, though we'd be going home by another way. But the good news we know from Cleopas is that these journeys are never undertaken alone on the Road called Burning Hearts, for we travel together with the resurrected Christ, he who "walks with me, and talks with me, and tells me I am his own."

### IV.

Let me tell you a story. Every year, the youth of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, take full leadership of one Sunday morning

worship. Always in the spring, most often during Eastertide. Guided by the lectionary text for the day, their planning is intentional in every element — from the space setup, to the hymn selection, written prayers and proclaimed word. Every year, this youth-led worship transforms the church, and youth-led worship in 2014 was no different.

The text for that Sunday was this story of the road to Emmaus. Their wise youth minister, my friend Carol, had invited them to consider a theme for that Sunday's worship, so they spent some time looking over the landscape of their group, the year they had shared together, and what had been unfolding in their own lives.

There was the teenager whose parents' marriage was tearing their family apart. The one whose adoptive single dad was buried in his work because he didn't know how to parent a teenager. The one who was bullied at school because of his indifferent relationship with hygiene. The one who contemplated suicide as she began to understand her sexuality. The one who flirted off and on with an eating disorder as a way to exert control somewhere in her life, because her straight-As were beginning to slip. The one with a cocktail of medications for ADHD and depression and anxiety. The one who was living with his grandparents, whose anger burned hot and fast about all the short straws he'd pulled in life. The one worried about how she could afford college because her dad had just been laid off. The ones fearful of what was to come next, wondering who they will be and where they will find their place when forced by the passing of time to move on to the next adventure.

As Carol told our staff at the time about this planning meeting, she described the multiple layers of what was said and unsaid, what was named

and what was simply understood by those who, despite all the odds, had seen and known and heard and experienced the risen Lord in their midst. So when Paxton wondered aloud about the theme, “what about ‘no matter the road, we walk it together?’; *they knew* – this was it. This was the theme. *No matter the road, we walk it together*. No matter the road – the pathways filled with fear, doubt, suffering, hardship, shame, grief, loss, anger, conflict – no matter the road, we are never alone. No matter the road, the way is that of the crucified and resurrected Christ. No matter the road, no matter the turns and twists and dead ends and halts, no matter where it starts and no matter where it ends, God in Christ is always present, binding us to him, him to us, and us to one another with love, every step along the way.

After that Sunday, the theme began to catch on. In Deacons meetings when faced with a potentially-divisive conversation, in homes or hospital rooms beside the sick and suffering, in tense staff meetings or relationship conflict, and weeks later when one of those hard-to-love teenagers found himself in a crisis, one among us would remember and say, almost as call and response: *no matter the road*. And because Love made flesh joined us on the way – listening, interpreting, taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, where our eyes were opened and we could finally recognize the companion who made it possible – the answer was clear: ... *we walk it together*.

Let me tell you another story. During those early days of the pandemic, when we the people were coping with the unimaginable by discovering things at home like Zoom and Tiger King and sourdough and nightly cheering for our healthcare workers, I discovered that walking would, in fact, save my actual life, and that’s not too much of an exaggeration. It was my daily loop – three miles from my house through Reynolda and Graylyn. For when the fear and

anxiety of the pandemic began to close in or the exhaustion seemed too heavy a load to bear, I would slip on my shoes, and go for a walk. I learned every nook and cranny of this trail: the way the tall grasses swayed in the early morning breeze, the feeling of safety I felt thanks to those old trees that covered the forest like a canopy who'd seen crises come and go, the spots where I had to walk to the left or the right based on where the tree roots would peek above ground ready to trip you up, the creek that snuggled behind the bushes and then opened to a pond. I watched it change throughout the seasons, tracing its familiar curves in spring and summer, fall and winter. I learned its smells and sounds, and grew accustomed to its daily travelers and delighted guests.

That winter, a number of those old trees were felled by ice and snow, which closed a portion of the trail for repair. *I miss my trail!*, I thought each time I detoured past the uprooted trees and muddy path. Yet I grew familiar with the bypass, learning to appreciate the path beside the field and the birds I saw flying about. Months passed. And then one day, I found that this part of the trail had finally reopened! I eagerly looked for the familiar sights and well-worn ruts in the trail, only to realize that its repair and reconstruction had involved carving an *entirely new trail* right beside the old one! Suddenly my eyes were opened to new sights I'd never before seen: the way the light filtered in through the ivy-covered trees, the rolling hill visible for the first time, the quick zigs and zags the new trail took that kept this walker alert. And what astonished me to no end was that this new trail was practically the same path, using the same landscape and space and materials. But it had been made new.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> First shared in the church's newsletter on April 14, 2021.

V.

Friends, no matter the road – roads of memory or discovery, roads of broken hopes or burning hearts – *no matter the road*, Jesus travels with us every step of the way. Even when we don't recognize him. Even when we don't know where we're going. Even if we're not even sure of the road on which we move! *For no matter the road, we walk it together.* A Road called Resurrection, you might say. Amen!