

The Road to Emmaus

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*After the torchlight on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
THE SHOUTING AND THE CRYING*

*Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying*

THESE LINES ARE FROM T. S. ELIOT'S POEM "The Waste Land."¹ In a footnote, he explains that the lines describe the situation after the last painful days of Christ's ministry, after the suffering in "frosty silence" at the Garden of Gethsemane, and after the imprisonment, trial, and crucifixion. The shouting and crying had ceased. Christ's ministry had ended, and, for many, hope itself had ended as well. What remained was a spiritual wasteland.

On the Sunday afternoon following the Crucifixion, two of Christ's disciples made their way to a place called Emmaus, a small town seven or eight miles from Jerusalem. This is a journey that began in despair and concluded in hope, and I wish to examine this transformation and apply it to the human condition. I hope to show that the road to Emmaus is a road we ourselves often travel. T. S. Eliot imagined the events that transpired on that road, and he wrote about their broader significance in section V of *The Waste Land*.

The symbolic nature of Luke's account is described by Joseph Fitzmyer in *The Anchor Bible*.² Fitzmyer argues that the Gospel of Luke

1. "The Waste Land" (5.322-29), *Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1989), 282-294.

2. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1557-58. See also the introduction, 164-71

incorporates a “geographic perspective” by employing the physical features of Palestine as a theological teaching tool.³ If Fitzmyer is correct, Luke’s geographical references do more than locate Christ in space; they also represent ideas pregnant with spiritual meaning. In Luke’s account, the Lord “makes his way” (*poreuesthai*) through daunting opposition, across the physical features of Palestine, to his destiny in Jerusalem, the City of Promise. The road, a geographic path connecting the disparate events of Christ’s life, leads toward Gethsemane and Calvary; it is, hence, also a symbol capturing the process of his journey toward salvation.

At the end of his gospel, Luke once again uses the imagery of the road, this time in the story of the two disciples headed for Emmaus, who are also “making their way” (*poreuomenoi*) through a similar geographic setting and are also encountering opposition (Luke 24). I suspect Luke intends this as an expansive gesture, a symbolic connection between the Lord’s mission and every disciple’s personal journey. In Luke’s geographic perspective, this process—first demonstrated in Christ’s mortal journey, then expanded in the Emmaus narrative to apply to all his disciples—is represented by the road.⁴ The road to Emmaus becomes our road.

Little is known about these two disciples, except that they were not of the Twelve and that one of them was named Cleopas; nor is it known why they were going to Emmaus. No one knows the modern-day location of Emmaus itself although several possibilities have been proposed. We do, however, know the mood of the disciples as they traveled. The narrative tells us simply that they were “sad.” Their master, Jesus Christ, who they thought would bring liberation to their people, had been crucified with common criminals. Although they had seen him perform miracles, he’d seemed unable to save even himself. The miracles had ceased. Hope had ceased. Death and captivity remained. Their feelings must surely have echoed the spiritual dissolution described by Eliot: “*He who was living is now dead. We who were living are now dying*”.⁵

Similarly, James E. Talmage surmises: “There could be but one topic of conversation between them, and on this they communed as they walked, citing incidents of the Lord’s life, dwelling particularly upon the fact of His death through which their hopes of a Messianic reign had

3. A detailed investigation of Luke’s geographic perspective is found in Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 18-96.

4. Fitzmyer points out that Luke employs a double use of the term “on the road” (*en te hodo*) to emphasize the geographic location of the narrative (Luke 24:32, 35). The KJV uses the phrase “by the way,” or “in the way.” Note that “the road” is emphasized as the place of instruction.

5. The Waste Land, 5.329.

been so sadly blighted. . . .As they went they were engrossed in sorrowful and profound discourse."⁶

The reader might ask: Have I walked this road to Emmaus? Do I know what it is to be engaged in sorrowful and profound discourse? Has something I greatly desired collapsed under the stifling weight of my inadequate presumptions? Have I lost all expectation of living up to high ideals, and do I now fear to drink the bitter dregs of Isaiah's "cup of trembling?" (Isa. 51:22).

Maybe we struggle with the death of loved ones or despair at overcoming a particular sin or weakness. Perhaps we are experiencing what Eugene England calls the "Paradox of Selfhood" and agonize under what seem to be competing concepts of integrity and obedience.⁷ Hopelessness and confusion can flourish under a wide set of conditions. When such emotions plague us, I believe we walk with the disciples as they traveled the road to Emmaus. We journey through times of doubt, of discouragement, and of death. We walk on roads that Eliot envisions as having "no water, only rock,"⁸ and in this absence of water (traditional symbol of birth and life), we come to understand that "fear is a handful of dust."⁹

A connection can be made between this dry road and Plato's ancient idea of *aporia*, as set out in his *Meno*. Plato argues that true knowledge will never be ours unless we first realize what we do not know. A belief that one already possesses complete answers to all questions stifles inquiry and leads to mental stagnation. Instead, one must be motivated to search, to think, to reason, but this motivation only comes with an awareness of need. The condition in which we are painfully aware of our lack of knowledge—when we are perplexed and hopeless—is called *aporia*. False ideas have been stripped away, and the need for new understanding becomes obvious and acute.

Aporia is not a pleasant experience. Plato describes it as a feeling of paralysis, of numbness, or of being "stung by a sting-ray." Examining the etymology of the word, we find that the first Greek letter, alpha, is the "alpha privative," which denotes "lack" or "lacking." *Poros* indicates a "path" or a "way." *Aporia*, then, suggests lacking a way or direction or being lost. Thus, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were in a state of spiritual *aporia*: Their conception of the Messiah had been proven wrong. They were now lost, and did not know what to do.

The anxiety and confusion of the road are formidable, but Plato would want us to understand that *aporia* is a necessary step on the path leading to

6. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1973), 685.

7. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984), 19-36.

8. The Waste Land, 5.331.

9. *Ibid.*, 1.30.

true knowledge. Once prejudice and error have been cleared away, we can be taught to construct surer knowledge on a sturdier foundation. Applying this idea to the narrative in Luke is instructive: The events of the previous week had cleared away the disciples' false intellectual and spiritual conceptions; the construction of a more mature knowledge could now begin. This process provides one possible reason for human suffering in the wasteland: such suffering creates doubt, and doubt creates an openness to new ideas. It makes us yearn for answers to riddles which we, in pride or ignorance, may have thought were already solved.

The disciples had inherited a nearly universal misunderstanding about the nature of the Messiah. The Savior often tried to tell them that his kingdom was not of this world, that his redemption would come not in the form of military conquest or of fire from heaven, but would instead be realized within the quiet confines of the individual spirit. They did not understand. But with the disillusionment and *aporia* after the crucifixion, they could finally achieve a new and truer understanding of the nature of Christ's mission. We must die, the Savior often taught, in order to live, and so also our prejudice and error must die, in order to give our understanding new birth.

There were more lessons the disciples needed to learn on the road to Emmaus. As these two walked, someone they did not recognize drew near. This "stranger" said to them, "What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?" (Luke 24:17). Cleopas responded, "Art thou a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days. . .concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God. . .and how the chief priests have crucified him?" (Luke 24:18-20). The disciples then told, with an air of perplexity, no doubt, the strange tale of the morning when the women had found the empty tomb and reported visions of angels (Luke 24:22-24). The stranger's identity remained continually hidden.

Similarly, T. S. Eliot writes of an unknown person walking with the inhabitants of his wasteland:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
BUT WHEN I LOOK AHEAD UP THE WHITE ROAD*

*There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle.
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?¹⁰*

10. *The Waste Land*, 5.360-66.

Eliot thus implies that sojourners in the wasteland are not alone; they have an unknown and elusive companion. In a footnote to this stanza, he points out that some early Antarctic explorers, such as Ernest Shackleton, reported in their travels that as they reached the limits of their physical strength, they experienced delusions, believing their party contained one member more than could be counted.¹¹ They sensed an ethereal companion walking with them.

In like manner, as we reach the limits of our spiritual strength, someone walks beside us. It is no delusion caused by the Antarctic sun or by sheer physical exhaustion, nor is our companion mysteriously hidden from us by Eliot's brown mantle: ". . .for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up" (D&C 84:88). Our companion does not necessarily promise to alleviate the tragedy of the journey; he only promises that we will not walk the wasteland alone if only we recognize his presence.

The rest of the biblical account is well known: The stranger rebuked the disciples and instructed them in the teachings of the prophets. As they drew near the village, the disciples invited the stranger to stay overnight with them, the day being far spent. As they sat down to eat, the stranger blessed bread and broke it, and gave it to them. With this, the disciples' eyes were opened to recognize this stranger as their master, Jesus Christ, now resurrected and glorified. "And they said one to another: Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:25-32). The disciples then hurried back to the City of Promise.

As we reach the limits of hope, Luke's narrative encourages us to look to our fellow sojourner. This subtle traveling companion is not lost, nor weak, but has all the strength necessary to help us walk the wasteland. Isaiah understood this:

Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary? He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings of eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40: 17, 28-29, 31).

Our own *aporias* show us the limits of our strength and reveal what we still need to learn. Through the story of Emmaus, we discover, above all, the constancy of our companion. We learn that in the emptiness of

11. *Ibid.*, 5n5.

the tomb lies the fullest answer to the world's hopelessness. The hope extends from the bloody battlefields of Fredriksburg, Normandy, or Vietnam to the lethal ovens of the Holocaust, from Haun's Mill to Mountain Meadows, from the sick child working in a third-world sweat shop to the drug addict in the streets of Salt Lake City; from sinner to sufferer to the sorrowful, and—not least of all—to you and me and our own private wastelands. The road stands before us rocky with no water, true, but there is companionship there—and education. "There is the third" who walks always beside us. Haven't our hearts burned within us?