

## Trail Magic

Preached FCCW Virtual Worship Service, April 26, 2020

Luke 24:13-35

Those who hike, especially those who hike the Appalachian Trail, have an expression they use to describe the unexpected, awe inspiring events that sometimes happen to them on their journeys.

"Trail magic," they call it.

Trail magic can be something natural, like a glimpse of wildlife, or the majesty of an awesome sunset.

Trail magic can also be the unexpected kindness of strangers, such as a family offering to share its picnic with a passing hiker, or any time people further ahead on the trail leave something good for those who are coming along behind them to find and enjoy.

Trail magic is what two travelers encountered as they made their way along the road to Emmaus. Funny thing about that is, archaeologists can't really agree on where Emmaus was, exactly. So, we don't know how many miles remained until these two pilgrims reached their destination. But we do know how many miles they had put behind them. They were seven miles from Jerusalem.

They had also put seven days between themselves and the memory of when Jesus had ridden into that city on a donkey, greeted by the cheers of Palm waving crowds. And stumbled out of there days later, under the crushing weight of a heavy cross, as a mob screamed for him to be crucified. Seven miles is what these two travelers had put between them and that tragedy, but the memories, and the implications, were still very much with them.

Trail Magic began for them with the unexpected kindness of a stranger they met on the road. As the stranger approached and fell into step with them, he asked them why they were so downcast. After telling him about all that had happened to Jesus in Jerusalem, they said, "we had hoped that this Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel."

Did you catch that? They HAD HOPED. Which means that whatever hopes they had were now long gone. Even the rumors circulating before they left Jerusalem--rumors of an empty tomb where the body of Jesus had lain--were not enough to rekindle their shattered hopes.

So no matter where Emmaus was situated on a map, the fact that it was anyplace but Jerusalem was all it took to make it a good place to be for these brokenhearted disciples. And since we don't really know where Emmaus actually was, this story is not so much about a destination, as it is about a journey. That means the Road to Emmaus could be anywhere, or anytime when life feels overwhelming and hopeless. You could even say, the Road to Emmaus can be a state of mind.

We've all probably walked this trail, at one time or another. It's the road that is paved with our own abandoned hopes. Like:

We had hoped that we could be a happy family, but everything fell apart.

We had hoped that a job would turn up, but now we might lose our home.

Emmaus is any road where we are trying to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and some distressing reality in our life.

It could be the road that many of us have been walking during this pandemic.

Your Emmaus might be the anxiety you feel about a loved one who has been infected.

It could be your fears about your own health and finances.

Or about when, or even if, the world will ever be the same as it was.

But Emmaus can also be the place where you are the beneficiary of some Trail Magic.

For those two disciples on their Emmaus Road, some potent "Trail Magic" arrived in the form of a stranger who joined them on their journey. The stranger was the resurrected Jesus. Luke informs us though, that "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him." "Trail Magic" for them begins with having their eyes opened to see a new reality.

Using the scriptures, Jesus showed them how everything troubling that had happened in Jerusalem--the events that had set their feet on the road to Emmaus--were not the stone upon which their high hopes were forever dashed, but the cornerstone upon which those hopes would be fulfilled. Later, remembering the stranger's words, they also recalled how their hearts burned within them, the way a breeze can fan dying embers into a blazing fire.

When they stopped for the night, they invited the stranger to be their guest. As they sat down to eat, Jesus blessed and broke the bread. In that moment their eyes were opened to recognize this stranger for who he truly was. And even though Jesus disappeared into thin air as suddenly as he had first appeared to them, they knew that it was Jesus who had been their companion on the way, all along.

*That* was truly trail magic.

But there was more trail magic to come. Because, even though night was now falling and it would be dangerous to be traveling, they gathered their things and hit the trail again. Only this time they were not running from Jerusalem. They were heading straight back to it. Straight back to the place and the events that had crushed their spirits and wiped out their hopes. Back to Jerusalem. This time not with heavy hearts, but with hearts on fire to share the good news with others who still grieved Jesus' cruel fate.

All at once, *they became* trail magic for others! The gift they carried was not only news of Jesus' resurrection, but evidence of their own resurrection life. Not a somewhere over the rainbow kind of resurrection. But the kind of resurrection life that can strengthen us on the Emmaus roads we travel here and now. The kind of Resurrection living that raises our hopes from the ash heap of despair. The kind of resurrection that brings to life in *us* the courage we need to confront our own Jerusalems, when we feel like running from them.

Resurrection that we can be a part of ourselves, as we walk the Emmaus Road of this pandemic, unable to see for certain where it will lead us and unsure about how many more miles we have to travel. Resurrection awareness that opens our eyes to recognize Jesus as our companion when up until then the bad news had kept us from knowing he was there with us every step of the way. Resurrection vision that breaks through the gloom of these present circumstances in our own glimpses of trail magic.

Like the trail magic of doctors and nurses lining hospital corridors to cheer a single coronavirus patient as they are wheeled to the hospital exit after being cured.

The trail magic of drive by birthday parties with signs and sirens for children not able to invite friends into their home to celebrate.

The trail magic painted rocks with positive messages left in random places around town like Easter eggs.

The trail magic of people getting outside and walking; maybe introducing themselves to neighbors they may have barely known before the pandemic began.

And finally, the trail magic that happens in communities of faith like this one, where we share our experiences of having our eyes opened to the presence of Jesus with other people who also have their own stories of Emmaus Roads they have walked and unexpected graces that came their way.

Just as the two Emmaus disciples who rushed back to Jerusalem were greeted when they got there, with the other disciple's stories of how the resurrected Jesus' had come to them when all had seemed lost. Stories that, when shared, added to their own experiences, forging a stronger faith and a more powerful hope.

Life is a journey, and like it or not, much of the trip we spend on Emmaus Roads of one sort or another; either running from our crosses or turning and facing them.

Mostly, the difference between traveling in one direction or the other is the "Trail Magic" we experience when our eyes are opened to see Jesus walking with us, listening to us, and feeding our souls, with the bread of Resurrection Life.

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