

The Walk to Emmaus or *La Caminata a Emaús* from Luke 24:13-35

The Rev. Javier Alanís, PhD, JD

Pastor, St. John Lutheran Church, San Juan, Texas

We are all familiar with the beautiful Easter story of the two disciples walking to Emmaus when they encounter Jesus as the stranger or the foreigner (Luke 24:13-35). As a former seminary professor, I have taken seminary students to the Texas/Mexico border for over twenty years. I have walked with them in the border spaces between our two nations, a walk that has been part of my life's journey. I am the son of Mexican immigrants who came to south Texas over 100 years ago during their flight from Mexico's Civil War. I navigate life between two cultures, both the U.S. American and the culture of my Mexican border and Latiné heritage. I am a hybrid person who lives within the spaces of two cultures, two nations, and two languages. When I read the Easter story of the walk to Emmaus, I read it within this border space.

At the U.S.-Mexican border there is a constant movement of peoples and an interchange of ideas. I hear differently at the border than I do in other parts of the country. This includes how I experience the Gospel as a hybrid person. What follows are my observations from reading the story of the walk to Emmaus from within my border space.

First, biblical scholars have pointed out that one of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was more than likely a woman, because she is unnamed in the text. Cleopas is named because he is a man. Women were not usually named in the Gospel stories unless they figured prominently, such as Mary of Magdala or Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha. The nameless disciple is something I want us to consider in the text because there are many unnamed women and people who walk their journey of faith to the U.S.-Mexico border from all over the world. Knowing people by their name is important for those of us who experience invisibility and namelessness. There are many folks like this unnamed disciple at the U.S.-Mexico border. I have met them. I have heard their stories. I have prayed with them at the border.

Second, the disciples are experiencing grief at the loss of Jesus of Nazareth. As they walk, they are re-living the memory of the crucifixion. They are sad—"tristes" or "*cabizbajos*" we say in

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Spanish—when they meet Jesus as the stranger on the road. He approaches them and asks them what they are talking about, like a pastoral care concern. We see this kind of grief, and feeling of loss of hope, and sense of being lost, with people of faith who have walked hundreds of miles to get to the U.S.-Mexico border. They often show signs of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder). The two disciples in the Gospel were having that kind of experience. Jesus had been crucified. He had embodied their hope for freedom from the oppressive Roman government. They felt hopeless. They were grieving the death of the one they had hoped would redeem Israel, or as my Latin American Bible version states, "would bring them freedom," or *libertad*, in Spanish. To lose hope when you live under an oppressive government is a profound loss. The word "hope" in Spanish is translated as *esperanza*, from the root word, *esperar*, "to wait for something." So, to lose hope is to stop waiting for a hoped-for outcome, in this case the freedom that would come from the actions of the liberator, Jesus of Nazareth. They were not expecting a crucifixion! Thus, their PTSD.

This is like the hope and pursuit of freedom that many have in the border spaces of my ministry. Many seek freedom from oppression, persecution, death squads, and from political and domestic violence, and instability in their home countries. When the two disciples start telling Jesus their mournful story, they tell him, "He was the one we had hoped would redeem Israel," or to quote the New International Bible version in Spanish, "*pero nosotros abrigábamos la esperanza de que era él quien redimiría a Israel.*" This

translates as “we wore our hope like a garment, like a coat that we were wrapped in believing and waiting for him to redeem Israel, to set it free from oppression.” This is the kind of embodied hope that people bring with them to the U.S.-Mexico border. They wrap their often injured and violated bodies in this expectant hope. They walk the journey with the hope of gaining freedom from death, poverty, violence, persecution, and hopelessness, often meeting them again tragically at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Third, the two disciples are walking with their memory of loss within what I call a “third space.” This third space is a “liminal,” or in-between space. This is the space between the hope they once knew by following Jesus, and his death, grief, and resultant loss of hope. They are in this liminal space when they meet the stranger, or the alien that is mentioned in the Hebrew canon, a word that is racialized and politicized at the U.S.-Mexico border. This third space is a border space.

For those of us living along the U.S.-Mexico border, this is the liminal space between two nations and a multiplicity of global peoples. It is the space where one encounters the Holy or the Sacred other. This is “sacred third space.” It is the place where epiphanies occur when one engages another human being with a memory of loss. This is the place where we acquire new awareness. The Brazilian educator Paolo Friere calls this acquired awareness, “*concientización*,” or consciousness raising. We become conscious of a new reality in this sacred third space. We acquire a new way of understanding ourselves in relationship to another human being in the sacred encounter. It is the space of conversion.

This is what happens to the two disciples. They enter a more profound and meaningful third space when they encounter Jesus as the stranger. The resurrected Jesus approaches them, joins them on the road, is present to them as they recall their embodied memory of loss and begins to teach them the meaning of their sacred memory from the perspective of the resurrection. He meets them in their border liminal space and gives them a new, more informed interpretation of the Scriptures that will lead to their renewed hope, renewed self-awareness, and conversion to hope. This third space is thus a creative space where new epiphanies occur, new visions are acquired, new perspectives are gained, and conversions erupt. By conversion I mean that we become what the theologian Paul Tillich calls “the new being.” We become something new to ourselves and to others because of a sacred encounter in a third space of acquired awareness.

So, what might this all mean for us as the church? I believe we are called to enter this third space. On the one hand, we already live there as *kin-dom* people, a people related to each other by virtue of our baptism. As a people of faith, we live in the *kin-dom* now, but not yet fully realized. We live in eschatological liminality. We are a *kin-dom* people called to live in hope, because we have been given a promise of new life that has already begun in our baptism and will be fully realized at the end of his-story or her story, the story of the nameless ones. We live in the tension of liminal space. We are a *kin-dom* people proclaiming new realities and promises while living in a broken world. There is tension

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here, but it is also a creative space where the Sacred encounters and transforms our being.

The two disciples on the walk to Emmaus experienced their third space when the stranger approached them and was present to them in holy conversation. This was a relational moment. It occurs when the Sacred comes to us as it did for the two on the road. The conversation and exchange of ideas led to the invitation to stay the night. In Spanish we would say, “*¡quédate con nosotros!*” Stay with us! This is the invitation to hospitality for which our cultures are known. This invitation is relational. There is mutual encounter here in this third space of hospitality exchange. The two recognize Jesus in the blessing and the breaking of the bread. In that sacred moment, their eyes are opened, and they recognize the resurrected Jesus. Their vision and hope are renewed. This is what happens to the faithful during communion in our border third spaces.

To further interpret this story from the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, I will share with you some of my experiences while taking students to the border third spaces for over twenty years. I have seen and experienced a church who enters this third space with intentionality and a strong conviction and commitment to express Gospel hospitality with global strangers. In caring for them, the church feeds and clothes them. We serve them meals and provide them with a worship experience of renewed hope. We hear their stories of embodied memory, and we pray with them as an expression of our solidarity. In that third space of encounter, the church is transformed, renewed, and, some would argue, converted!

The Sacred encounters us when we meet global strangers who are arriving at our border spaces looking for renewed hope and freedom. Like our ancestors, they seek hope for a better future. Like my family fleeing a civil war over 100 years ago, they carry their hope with them like a garment. They come seeking freedom from unrest, persecution, and death squads. When the church enters this third space willingly and intentionally, the Sacred encounters us in the nameless strangers who then become José, María, Jesús and Cleopás, the people of our faith story who express their faith as the gift they offer us. Together in this Sacramental Third Space we are transformed and renewed by the Spirit of *esperanza*, hope that is embodied through the giving hands of our hospitality.

What I have learned at the border third space is that our walk of faith is one of accompaniment, something that the Global Mission unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has taught us. We walk the journey together and learn to carry each other's burdens along the way. Jesus accompanied the two disciples, Cleopas and the unnamed, and in the walk and the sharing of hospitality, something new happened. The two received renewed sight, a new vision of one who walks with them on their journey to freedom. The good news that he was alive and resurrected is the same good news that we deliver to our neighbors when we meet them at our border spaces and share a meal. They share with us their story of the one who walks with them on the journey north, the same one who walks the journey with us in our border spaces. In that *encuentro*, in that sacred encounter, we join the rest of the disciples in celebrating the good news! He is risen and walks with us on the road to freedom!

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