

## TO FOLLOW THE LIGHT — THREE IMAGES OF JESUS

### *Images of Jesus: Host and Guest*

Luke 24:13-15, 17, 21, 28-33, 35

April 19, 2026

There is a famine in our land. We have never been more fed. We have never felt more hollow. The proof of the famine is the hunger we still feel. The source of our hunger is difficult to diagnose. After all, the shelves are filled, the technologies are advancing, and anything you desire can be *DoorDashed*.

Perhaps it is not until we have tried to ease it with everything else that we discover, by process of elimination, our hunger is for God. We are hungry for a table. For the unhurried lingering, for the slow conversation, for the simple grace of being known by someone sitting close enough to pass the salt.

You can see the hunger in the posture of our lives. I saw it last week in a cafeteria filled with middle school students sitting elbow to elbow, each one inside a tiny screen. You see it in family members ordering separate meals to different rooms of the house. You see it in the disappearance of the places we used to gather without even needing a reason—places like front porches and fellowship halls and kitchen counters where life happened together. I fear we have mistaken the feed for the meal. And we are starving.

A few weeks ago, I was engaging in one of my favorite pastimes. I was eating in a restaurant alone. Solitary, all by myself, no need to converse. But business was slow, and the server had time to talk. It was a lovely conversation, but when she found out I was a pastor at Second Presbyterian Church, she stopped the conversation, looked me directly in the eyes, and asked a question I cannot shake.

She asked, "Can just anybody go there?"

Now listen. She was not being hostile. But she needed to know—before she risked walking through these doors—whether she would be welcomed in this

space. And I would suggest that question is a kind of indictment we need to take seriously because she was asking about this church. But she was also asking about us, about us collectively, and she was asking about him, about Jesus, about whether the Jesus we claim has survived our handling of him. The idols we create in our image will never feed the hunger in our souls. We need Jesus. We need the Jesus of the Gospels—the one who cannot be commandeered and refuses to be recruited.

Every generation tries to press Jesus into its service. We drape him in our symbols, send him to fight our battles, bend his words toward our purposes, claim his blessing as our possession. But Jesus will not be made an ornament for our cause. He will not be wielded as a weapon. And in moments like ours, our refusal to bow to images and idols matters deeply, desperately.

For when sacred language is used to bless conquest, or divide the world into who belongs and who does not, or to baptize domination in the name of God—we in the church should not shrug or flinch. We must not capitulate or acquiesce. Because at the center of the gospel is not a banner we wave but a table to which we are summoned.

Throughout the gospels, it is at the table where Jesus keeps getting himself in trouble. He eats with all the wrong people. Sinners and tax collectors. Pharisees and outcasts. The ones nobody made room for. And when he's not sitting with them at the table, he's telling these outlandish stories about feasts where the least expected guests are given the best seats at the table. When he's not telling stories, he's gathering crowds on hillsides and feeding them, or breaking bread with his closest friends, or sharing a table with the one who would betray him. His command to his disciples is to extend the table.

Yes, from the very beginning, we have wanted a Savior with a sword. And from the very beginning, our Lord has led us to a table.

And so, it is Easter evening. A pair of disciples are walking together seven miles in the wrong direction. Back in Jerusalem, that's where the story is still unfolding. In Jerusalem, that's where it's all happening. Emmaus is where you go when you've already given up. To walk away is to let disappointment and despair choose your direction. And they are walking away. And they are not alone.

There are many reasons people walk away. Many reasons people walk away from community, from church, from faith, from this story, from the hope it holds. Maybe they have been wounded. They have asked hard questions and been given simplistic platitudes. They have watched the faith they loved get weaponized, or bow to powers it was never meant to serve. They have shown up in the middle of a crisis and nobody noticed. They have wondered, "Can just anybody go there?"

The cost of belonging was conformity, and they would not pay it. They could not reconcile the Jesus they read about with the Christianity they saw. And so they stepped away. They drifted. Or they were sent away. Or they simply could not stay. Hope, once held in their hearts, now feels foolish at best, a cruel trick at worst. So they walk away.

And here is what happens on the road to Emmaus. A stranger comes alongside them. It is a peculiar fact in the Gospels that after his resurrection, Jesus is unrecognizable to his closest friends. Mary in the garden mistakes him for a gardener. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognize this stranger in their midst who asks a simple question. "What are you talking about?" And they stop.

Do you know that there is grace in being asked the right question at the right moment? Jesus walks alongside these disciples and asks: *What are you carrying, not in your hands, but in your hearts? Why are your faces downcast and stained with tears? How is it with your soul? How are you? What are you talking about?*

They tell him everything. The whole story. The message and the miracles. The thrill of hope and the depth of disappointment. The tables they have shared with laughter and joy and friendship and the cross on which their Lord was crucified. And when they are finished, they speak some of the saddest words in all of scripture. "We had hoped that he was the one, the one to redeem us."

*We had hoped.*

They wanted redemption that looked like power. They wanted a God who would meet the world on its terms and bend it their way. And they were not wrong that redemption was coming. They were wrong about its shape. And we still are. We know these stories. We read them. We understand the heart of the Gospel. And still, we want a God who does things our way. Still, we want a God who acts on our timeline. Still, we want a God who leaves our enemies in the pit, on the losing end.

From the very beginning, we have wanted a sword. From the very beginning, he has set a table. So, my friends at Second Church, when the name of God is used to dominate or divide, to diminish, demean, or dehumanize, do not call it faith. Call it blasphemy. But remember this when you do: the temptation is not only out there. It lives in us. In every human heart.

And still the stranger finds us on the road. Still the stranger comes alongside us in our misplaced expectation and our dashed hope. In our disappointment and our defeat, he walks with us.

And so, they arrive at Emmaus. The day is nearly over. And they do something radical, in their time no less than in ours: they invite a stranger in. *Stay. Eat with us.* Perhaps some part of them remembers the hillside, the loaves and the fish, the day when they demanded Jesus send the crowds away and he answered simply, "No, You give them something to eat."

And so they do. They set a table in Emmaus. They prepare to be the hosts. They sit down at the table together, and there, everything reverses. He takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. He gives it to them. And they see him.

There is no argument. No explanation. No theological proposition. Just bread broken at a borrowed table. Just the Guest becoming the Host. And their eyes are opened. Of course they are. After all, this is where he is always most himself. Where he is always recognizable. Where he is always most powerful. Not in displays of brute force or domination, but at table, an ordinary table, ordinary food, people grieving a future they thought would take a different shape.

And the table changes what they see. And the table changes who they are. Suddenly the stranger is a guest, the guest is a host, and the host is a witness.

Forty years ago, a young couple walked into an elementary school on Easter Sunday morning. They were looking for a church and had seen a sign in a wheat field that said a new church will be planted in this spot. For now, worship at the elementary school.

The couple was new to the area. They had two small daughters. They did not know a soul. They walked into the elementary school cafeteria on Easter morning, and a man hurried up to them. He was holding a stack of bulletins, and they reached out to receive their bulletin. And he asked a question. "Are you the ushers?"

Tim and Susan looked at each other. "No. We're visitors. First time."

The man smiled a broad smile and handed them the whole stack. "Well, can you be the ushers today?"

There is grace in the right question asked at the right moment. They walked in as guests. They walked out as hosts. And here's the twist in the story: they never left.

They did not just find a community. They were pulled into a people, into a story that has shaped their lives.

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, Kansas, became their spiritual home—the place where their daughters were raised, where their friendships grew deep, where their griefs were held and their faith took root. When their daughters were married, the church gathered. When their grandchildren were

baptized, the church bore witness. And when the diagnosis came, the church showed up and stayed. In that sanctuary, in the life of that community, their daughter heard a call to ministry. And she was ordained on that chancel. Their daughter is my wife, Sara.

That is the power of an invitation. That is the power of a table set by grace and a covenant kept for life. That's what you need. That's what you want. That's why you're here. You don't want the conjured-up Jesus holding a sword in his hand and vengeance on his mind. You want the Jesus who turns the tables of injustice, who turns the guests to hosts, who turns the world upside down.

In Emmaus, the moment the bread is broken, everything changes. I love this detail in the text in Luke 24. They don't even finish the meal. The meal was never the point. Luke says that same hour, they rise from the table, in the dark, and walk seven miles back. I would only quibble with one detail in Luke's Gospel. I don't think they walked. I think they ran. Listen to the words on their lips: *the Lord has risen indeed*. Those are not words to be spoken at a slow pace. They sprint back to Jerusalem to tell the truth of resurrection. *The Lord has risen indeed!* And Easter comes again.

Just moments ago, children came to the baptismal font in their parents' arms. They are growing up in a time when the name of Jesus is invoked to justify cruelty, protect power, and sanctify exclusion. You know that's true. And yet this morning, you told them they belong to God's grace. You made covenant to be their family of faith. And no pressure, but their lives will be shaped by what you do next, whether you tell them the truth about who Jesus is, whether you make room for the stranger when fear tells you to lock the doors, whether you name the idols of our age and refuse to bow down.

It occurs to me that whenever sacred words or images are bent toward domination, the church's answer must not be a louder argument, but a font that claims us, a table that welcomes us, a people who will not sacrifice the gospel on the altar of power. Because you cannot receive this bread and keep your appetite for conquest. You cannot receive this welcome and refuse

it to a stranger. We must be the community of the  
turned around. Back to Jerusalem. Back to the story.  
Back to community.

*Can just anybody go there?*

Yes. Yes. So, come on in. But be warned. This table will  
dismantle you. It will dismantle your arrogance. It will  
dismantle your fear. And it will feed your deepest hunger.

The Guest becomes Host. The stranger is the Way. The  
sword bent on conquest turns to bread for a famished  
world. O God, may it be so