

Luke 24: 13-35

by Amy Yoder McGloughlin Apr. 26, 2020

When I'm preparing to preach, I try to have a practice of reading the text every day during the week leading up to my sermon. The practice helps me to incorporate the text or story into my everyday life, giving me new ways to see the text showing up in my life.

This week, every time I read the text, I felt transported to Palestine. I lead delegations to Palestine every summer with Christian Peacemaker teams. The West Bank has become such a special, heart place for me. Having gone for several years in a row now, when I read this text, I can envision the walk that the disciples took on that day of the resurrection.

And as I read the text this week, I kept coming back to one particular place, and a particular family that has walked with me in the last few years.

So, let me tell you about the place and the family that's been so close to my heart.

I met the Issas by chance two years ago. The family lives in Anata, in East Jerusalem. I was bringing my delegation to Sabeel, a Palestinian Liberation organization in Jerusalem, and I had a miscommunication with the public bus driver. He directed me and my team to take the bus to Anata the village and refugee camp, when I wanted to go to Old Anata road.

So the bus driver dropped us off in the village of Anata, and sped off, and I realized almost immediately that we were not in the right place.

So there I was--me and 12 people--on the first day of the delegation, lost outside a refugee camp.

I asked around if any of the shopkeepers could speak english. No one could but a couple helpful shopkeepers called their cousins in the US and Canada and put them on the phone to help me out.

I asked the helpful cousins on the other side of the world--where is Old Anata road? And they said, "Just walk right up the hill and you'll find it.". So I started up the hill, and very quickly we found the separation wall. And I realized that we were on the wrong side of the

wall. Jerusalem was over there. We were over here in a refugee camp.

I tried to be calm about it. Most of the delegation didn't even know we were lost. But my son, Will, who was with me, knew exactly what was happening. I gave him the look one gives their kids--that look that says, "Do not let anyone know that I have gotten us lost."

I started looking for anyone else that could help. I ran into a man doing construction and asked again, "Do you speak english?" He shook his head apologetically, but then lit up. He jumped in his beat up Toyota, and gestured wildly for me and the delegation to follow him as he backed up the street.

I wasn't sure if I should follow this stranger. But I didn't know what choice I had. It was so hot, even at 9am, and we needed help.

So I asked my delegation to follow me while I followed this stranger wherever he was leading us. Meanwhile, I was thinking, "Lord, let this not be like the beginning of a bad horror film"

The man began backing his car up the hill, stopping occasionally to gesture to us to follow him. He backed into the driveway of his home, and ran up the stairs to his house, turning to invite us in.

So I followed him, and my group followed me. We did not know what to expect.

We entered his home, and there sat his entire family in the living room--children, wife, and an Aunt. They jumped up, and welcomed us to sit where they had been sitting. They brought us water, then tea, then coffee, then pomegranate and grapefruit juice. And THEN some sweets.

Still no one was speaking English.

My delegates were looking at me, asking quietly, "What are we doing here? Are we going to get to our destination?" And I asked them to be patient.

That's when Islam walked in. Let me just stop right here and say that the name, "Islam" means *submission to the will of God*.

Islam is 22, the most beautiful person--inside and out, and she spoke near perfect English, which she learned from watching Hollywood movies. She greeted us enthusiastically, and we got to know each other.

After about 15 minutes of this, we finally were able to determine that we were NOWHERE near our destination. Her father called a taxi company and they sent us a van to pick us up. But before we left for our next destination, the family insisted that we return the next night for dinner.

And we did. We came back the next night and the Issa family made us mokluba, a chicken, rice and vegetable dish that is the most delicious treat. They made stuffed grape leaves and baklava and treated us like royal guests. It was so generous, it felt like an embarrassing extravagance.

My son brought a soccer ball and the Issa children played soccer in the driveway with our younger delegates while the older folks sat together and smoked hookah (tobacco only hookah, I should add) and laughed together.

My Arabic is abysmal, and the only one of the Issa family to speak English was Islam, so my "conversations" with this family involved pictures on my phone, gestures and giggles about language barriers.

But despite all the limitations, it was one of the best nights of fun I've had in quite some time. We made new friends that night. And these are friends that I speak to still on a regular basis. We "talk" via social media, mostly through emojis with the mom, and with more conversations with Islam.

Meeting this family was a holy experience. I reflect on it often. I feel connected to this family in a heart way that I can't describe adequately with words. And they feel connected to us. When my son graduated from high school, the Issas made a fuss over him online. When Islam climbed Mt Kilimanjaro with some friends, and planted the Palestinian flag at the summit, I cried joyful tears with her. In the coming days, as the family is celebrating Ramadan, our family hopes to break the fast with them remotely.

So, how does the Issa family connect to our Emmaus story? As I've read this story every day this week, every time I get to vs. 32, which reads, The disciples said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while Jesus was talking to us on the road?"--Every time I get to that verse, the Issas come into my mind. I recognized that the heart burning of the disciples must have been that same heart feeling I have with Islam, Reem, Noor, Hassan, Omar and the rest of the family. My encounter with the Issas is one of those places where I can say I have experienced the risen Christ.

The Issas found me and my companions on the road, they shared a meal with us, and in our encounter. They shared their story with us, and we heard it. And we shared our story with them, and they listened.

That grace that I experienced in an unfamiliar place, even without a common language, has been a challenge to me. As a citizen of the US, I confess that my default is not hospitality. My default is suspicion and taking care of my own. But to be found on the road, to be seen and known and cared about with no string attached--that changed me. It's been working on me for these last few years. I can't see a stranger in the same way any more. A stranger is Jesus. A meal is sacred time. An invitation to hospitality is an invitation to transformation. And talk about the West Bank is talk about people I love, a family I care about, and a loyalty to folks that have given me a friendship that I certainly feel quite undeserving of.

The risen Christ is not just a set of stories we hear during the Easter season. The risen Christ is part of our own lived experiences. They are our hearts burning as we share a meal, or a journey. It is the presence of Christ surprising us with comfort, or joy, or kindness.

And yes, even during this global pandemic, we are finding ways to be surprised by Christ, showing up in the form of a good zoom worship service, a surprise meal at your doorstep, an unexpected note of gratitude, even when people don't send notes like that in the mail so much any more. We can experience a glimmer of the resurrected Christ among us. And we can share that vision of hope with each other.

Let us pray:

God of the Emmaus Road, you are with us
In our overwhelming grief,
In our struggles to understand
In our persistence on the journey.

You are with us God
Even when we want to look away
Even when we live with doubt
Even when we don't know why our hearts are burning.

Thank you for walking with us on this road. Thank you for sending
companions on the road
Teach us, Feed us,
Open our eyes.

AMEN

Questions for reflection:

- Who have been the transformative travelling partners on your journey?
- When have you experienced hospitality that helped you to see things in new ways?