

**“WHEN GOD COMES BACK”**  
**Luke 24:13-35**

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Simon Wiesenthal, was a young man when he was interred at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. One night he was sound asleep when another young prisoner named Arthur, a kind of dreamy skeptic of a fellow, grabbed his shoulder and shook him awake.

“Simon, do you hear?” He asked him

“Yes,” he mumbled, “I hear.”

“I hope you are listening because you really must hear what the old woman said.”

“What could she have said?”

“She said....God was on leave. What do you think of that Simon? God is on leave.”

“Let me sleep,” Simon said. “Tell me when He gets back.”

Arthur told him that Josek, a prisoner whom Simon admired, had asked an old woman if she had heard any news. But she only looked up to heaven and prayed, “Oh, God Almighty, come back from your leave and look at thy earth again.”

This set Wiesenthal to thinking. “I started thinking that God really is on leave. Otherwise the present state of things wouldn’t be possible. God must be on leave and he has no deputy.”  
(Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*)

Sometimes, it seems as if God has taken leave of the world. It certainly seemed that way to these two disciples of Jesus who left Jerusalem and were making their way to a village called Emmaus. They left because Jesus had left. He was gone, dead and buried, leaving them alone with their lost hopes and failed dreams.

Following Jesus had not been a whimsical fun-and-games interlude for them. The Gospels say the disciples left everything to follow Jesus – everything. Think about it, leaving behind your job, your home, your circles of friends and family, to follow someone, and then have that someone leave you hanging.

It was Easter evening and these two disciples were headed out of town, talking with each other about what had happened. We can only imagine what they were saying, “Can you believe it? How could it happen? Where did he go wrong? How stupid we were to follow him? What do we do now?”

They had heard the reports of the empty tomb. Some of the other disciples had checked it out but reported, “We did not see him.” The tomb may have been empty but evidently Jesus was still missing. On leave. Behind that conversation there must have been feelings of loss, failure and abandonment.

There are times and circumstances in all of our lives when it can feel as if God is on leave and we are abandoned. I read a story about another slaughter of school children, and I wonder why? We lose someone close to us – a spouse a child, someone who we could not imagine living without, and suddenly they are gone – and the loneliness and pain can be so overwhelming we are afraid to even face it for fear it will destroy us. We feel abandoned.

We go to the doctor for a routine checkup, suspicions are aroused. Tests follow and then the bad news. We are in for the fight or our lives. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. We feel abandoned. Or, we watch a child – the apple of our eye, the one in whom we take delight – head down a road which we know is marked dead end. We can't seem to get through to them. We cry out to God.

Has God gone off and abandoned us? Even Jesus has been to that place of desolation and asked the question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We don't know why these two disciples were headed to Emmaus. We know nothing about the village. It is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. It was as if they were headed nowhere in particular. They had been left, so they were leaving. With nowhere to go.

But on that road to nowhere, they were joined by Jesus, the Risen Christ. But they didn't even recognize him. Had no idea it was him. They were too lost, too afraid, too hurt. One of them, named Cleopas began to pour out his heart to Jesus. He tells Jesus the whole sorry tale of betrayal and death – abandonment.

Jesus listened, and then he retold the story. But when he retold it, he did it through a different set of eyes. "Beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them all the things about himself." Same story, different meaning. What hadn't made sense, begins to make sense. What they hadn't seen before, now they see.

It was at supper time when Cleopas and the other disciple finally had their answer. When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, gave to them, and their eyes were opened. They recognized him, and looking back reflected, "Were not our hearts burning within us as he was talking to us along the road?"

Bad things do happen, and when they do it is hard to make any sense of them. We are left to wander and to wonder, Why, why is this happening? And where, where is God? Why has he abandoned me?

It is only hindsight that allows us to see that even when we feel most lost, we are not lost to God. For a time it appeared they had indeed been left, abandoned, but grace was there, Christ was there – even when they could not see him.

Ann Lamott has a book with the title *Grace (Eventually)*. She puts the word "eventually" in parenthesis because she has come to understand that grace often comes undercover, unrecognized, after a struggle. "You start out where you are," Lamott explains, "and then a problem arises – the car breaks down, the cat gets sick. Then there's my effort to solve the problem through what I call 'my best thinking.'" Which generally does not work.. Finally, she says, "There's the moment when you get a tiny bit of light – and it's enough." Grace.

“I wish Grace were a more abracadabra thing.... That delicate silver bells would ring to announce Grace’s arrival. But no, it’s clog and slog, and scoot on the floor, in the silence in the dark. Until the light appears. In the middle of all the confusion, if we look closely enough, beyond the mush we slog through in life, we eventually find the light, the presence, the moment of insight and courage, which is grace.”

So what do we do in the meantime. What do we do in those times of lostness, loneliness and abandonment. Lamott says we muddle through, we slog along. The Bible simply calls it waiting. Again and again in the Bible, we are instructed to wait “Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and let your fear take courage, wait, I say, on the Lord. (Ps. 27)

I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him” (Isa. 8:17), the Prophet Isaiah declared in a dark time in Israel’s history. “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:3)

We wait for the Lord. Waiting is hard. We want to get it fixed right now. The only thing that makes waiting possible is hope. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had come to a dead end. Just as the tomb was a dead end for Jesus. It had been and always would be. But God in Christ turned the dead end of death into life. The Risen Christ met the two disciples on that dead end road to Emmaus, and turned them around. Put them back on the road to life.

In times of abandonment, waiting is hard. The only reason we can do it is because we can hope. And the only reason we have to hope is the resurrection. The resurrection tells us that despite all the evidence to the contrary, we will not be left alone. Christ will come to find us. Life triumphs over death. Grace makes a way. And while we wait and hope, Christ has given us a sign of his presence: “They recognized him in the breaking of the bread,” Luke records.

Our son is living on his own now, still in school, but has his own place. Stays busy studying. But every now and then we get a call, “Mom, Dad, what’s for supper tonight.” He doesn’t have time to cook for himself. Only time we get to see him, really, is when he comes to eat. The food is important but the being together is more important.

We were in Huntsville a few weeks ago. I called a good friend who is a pastor. I hadn’t seen him in a while. “What are ya’ll doing for lunch.” So, we broke bread together to catch up.

Someone dies, and what happens? People immediately began to bring in food. “You got to eat,” we say to them. And over potato salad and ham, we share stories. We remember so that we do not feel abandoned.

Christ knew that there would be times when we would feel lost, alone, abandoned. So he left us this table where we can gather to remember what was, to celebrate what is and to look to what can be. Here at the table, as we break the bread and take the cup, we experience anew the presence of Christ until he comes in final victory.