

The Road to Emmaus,
Rev'd Nanette Woodworth
Sermon plus Illustrations
April 19, 2026

Luke 24:13-35

One day when I was in elementary school my mother brought home a large art book. It was almost as exciting as the day she brought home a tiny chihuahua/terrier mix puppy in her coat pocket. (well, maybe not as exciting as that ...) But In both instances, she was so pleased with herself. The book was entitled Rembrandt's Drawings and Etchings from the Bible, published in Germany in 1963. It includes many of the works which were exhibited in 1956 in Amsterdam to honor his 350th birthday. I will be sharing some of the artwork with you today. Please refer to the illustrations (at the end of this essay) as we look at how Rembrandt interpreted the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. First, a little about the artist.

Rembrandt, the Dutch master of the 1600's, completed about 700 drawings and etchings of Biblical figures and scenes. This represents about 1/3 of all of his work, which shows how prodigious he was. Interestingly, most of these were not intended as studies for future painting. Those who have studied the volume of Rembrandt's work realized that most of these sketches had the quality of a diary. They were not done in the order they appear in the Bible. They were done in the order in which they connected with something going on in his life.

So they are in a sense biographical, and yet show profound insight into the people in these sacred stories. Rembrandt is interested in what can move a human heart in love, joy, and sorrow, in temptation, guilt or victory. He is interested in the human being's encounters with God, and especially with the resurrected Christ. In addition, the collection shows the development of Rembrandt's own inner life as a Christian on a spiritual journey.

So I would like to share with you some of his paintings, drawings and etchings that relate to the gospel story today. The oil paintings here are in color. At that time, pigments were sold in apothecaries as grinded powders ready to be mixed with oil to prepare paints in artist studios. The journal drawings were done in black charcoal pencil. The only etching is the 7th work of art in this bulletin. In etching,

the plate is covered with a protective coat of resin. The artist then scratches his design through the resin with a needle and immerses the plate in a bath of acid, which "bites" the metal wherever the resin has been removed. This process can be done many times over until the artist is happy with the results. Finally, the ink would print onto the paper on the unengraved portion.

Now, on to our gospel events. One of the characteristics of the post-resurrection appearance stories, is that they were not publicly proclaimed. Not everyone in the Bible who knew Jesus, or knew of Jesus, experienced the gospel stories first hand that we have read in the last few Sundays. They seem to have been reserved for the inner circle. Ironically, in these encounters with the resurrected Christ there is a common theme, which Rembrandt explores fully – that Jesus is not recognized at first by this inner circle of disciples to whom he appears. The strength in the appearance stories, and the essential magic of the artwork, lies between the *Christ of these "not-yet-perceived" moments, between encounter, and full recognition*. We will begin with the stories we heard on Easter and Easter 1 – the appearances to Mary at the empty tomb Easter morning, and to Thomas at the second meeting of the disciples in the Upper room.

Mary thought Jesus first to be a gardener as we see in **painting #1**. Often Rembrandt would show his subjects dressed like the Dutch of the 1600's, and here he is wearing a Dutch gardener's hat! Here is Mary, saying, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." In this work, Jesus is not shown with a halo or other radiance because as yet she still thinks he is a gardener. We do see, however, a great example of what Rembrandt is perhaps best known for besides his highly detailed etchings and use of color – his depiction of natural light and shadow. It is as if this use of natural light partially falling on both subjects, presages what is about to happen. By the way this is a portion of a larger work which includes the angels who spoke with Mary, and the delicate hues of the rising sun, the dawn of a new era. It's worth looking up on google images. (*Just google Rembrandt, "Jesus appears to Mary"*).

In the second **drawing #2**, if we look on the bottom left of the sketch, Jesus has just said, "Mary." She lifts up her hand and lowers her head, as if shielding herself from the light of her sudden recognition in the calling of her name, and she responds, "Rabboni!". For in this moment Jesus is surrounded by star-shaped

radiance. Rembrandt often uses a technique to show that the person has now fully seen and understands who he is; the eyes are drawn wide open. Here, Mary's eyes are hidden under her hood; yet one of the beams extends from Jesus to include her, the one who now understands her role, that she must go tell the others what has happened. That was the purpose of Jesus calling her name – she was called to tell the story of the Resurrection, *as we all are*, in our own unique ways, when we our name is called out at our Baptism.

Thomas of course had to see to believe, and looks astonished in **painting #3**. And what an important story this is, for those of us who will have discovered Jesus after the Ascension, because 'blessed are those who did not get see Jesus in person, and yet believe'. (John 20:29) And as we know now some 2000 years later, that is the majority of believers who have believed without seeing! Again, Rembrandt uses divine light surrounding Jesus to show the moment that He is known to Thomas. And clearly, his eyes are wide open, having gone from skepticism to belief.

Of all the appearance stories, Rembrandt concerned himself most intensively with the Road to Emmaus story. These are examples of entries into Rembrandt's journal, and not intended to be finalized works. But you will see there is much to notice in each one.

In **drawing #4**, Jesus is approaching the two travelers who are unnamed disciples who are in a conversation about the incredible events in Jerusalem these last few days – and Jesus is shown surrounded by divine light. He is still walking behind them, so only you and me, the viewers, recognize that this is Jesus. In the next **drawing #5**, they are all walking together, and we no longer see Jesus depicted that way, because the two on the road do not yet know it is Jesus. We see the Jesus very animated, and the two disciples riveted by his words, revealing what they say later in Luke, (24:32), "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures". They still do not yet know this is Jesus, but they know they are with a special pilgrim. In **drawing #6** we see them inviting this special stranger into their home to stay for dinner.

The drawings we just discussed lead us to the threshold of the actual event we have awaited. In **etching #7**, the stranger has accepted the invitation, and is sitting at the table breaking bread for them. This work not only depicts a scene of

recognition, it also has a sacramental character. Christ sits under a canopy on the long side of the table. In each hand he holds a piece of the bread he has broken. In doing so Jesus pronounces the blessing, as he did with the disciples at the Last Supper. In this moment their eyes are opened. Here the mystery is being revealed, as Christ himself is being revealed, and Christ is surrounded by divine light. One of the disciples is so startled that his hat falls off in his excitement. The other's reaction is more serene, with his hands clasped in prayer, completely enraptured and inwardly overwhelmed by the recognition that this is the Lord. There is also a child servant carrying a water pitcher – often Rembrandt includes an uninvolved third party, who is at most a little curious. The spiritual occurrence is echoed and dies away in that figure, allowing the viewer to look objectively upon the event. Will the viewer see, as the disciples do, that Jesus is the Christ, or be unmoved like the servant child? We always have the choice.

In **Oil painting #7**, also numbered seven because it is another interpretation of the same scene but is a painting not an etching. It is a wonderful example of how Rembrandt uses natural light on the table, shadow around the entire scene, and the divine light around the Christ figure, showing that in the breaking of the bread he is revealed to those sharing in the holy meal.

Then in **drawing, #8**, Rembrandt illustrates Luke 24:21, “And their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and then Jesus vanished in their sight.” The room is lit up by the candle light that illumines the wooden shutters, but a different light, a luminous light, flashes above the chair where Jesus was sitting and is now empty.

Making Connections

What we have heard and seen in the Emmaus story is a journey of gradual recognition of two disciples, on that amazing day of walking and talking with the stranger, who was the post-resurrection Christ.

1. Jesus summarizes for the pilgrims on the road, why Christ had to die and enter into Glory, explaining the trajectory from Moses and the Old Testament prophecies, to the fact that he was the Messiah, the fulfillment of these prophecies.

2. Jesus demonstrates to them, as in the Last Supper, how he is known in the breaking of the bread, and as such reminds them of his desire that we remember him in this way going forward for the rest of time.
3. And that in the breaking of the bread we modern disciples know him and our eyes are opened again and again – to recognize the work in the world that is needed at any given time.
4. At the outset of our discussion today, we said the Road to Emmaus story presents a twofold situation: one of being on the road with Jesus with the yet unrecognized Christ, and contrasted with it, the situation of sudden awareness, of believing recognition.
5. So where in our lives are we, in that moment between “not yet perceiving” and full recognition of the Resurrected Jesus? Is there not always within us a yearning to know Him better – see, follow and love him more? Is there perhaps some way in which we need to grow or change in order for that fuller understanding to manifest itself?
6. And is not our road more of a spiral, (than a direct line between points A and B), touching down each year, in the rhythm of our common life at St. John’s, on the mysteries of Jesus life, growing in deeper understanding and relationship with Him and each other along the Way?
7. If and when we find this recognition of Jesus we are seeking, are we more likely to react like the disciple at the supper table in Emmaus who jumped up in excitement at the realization of who their dinner guest was? or more like the one who withdrew into an awed silence.
 - a. Some will prefer to be more reflective, observing the erratic moods of this ‘coming like a lion, going out like a lamb’ spring.
 - b. But given the astonishing event of resurrection, given this glorious time of year when all that has been hibernating is bursting forth in lively color and brilliance, it may be a time to show eagerness in our faith, regardless. It is time for our hats to fall off in amazement, and to be exuberant.
 - c. Like a favorite Easter anthem:

*Awake, thou wintry earth! Fling off thy sadness!
Fair vernal flowers laugh forth, Your ancient gladness!
Christ is risen!*

The last line of our story from Luke expresses this renewed energy:

*Then they told [the others] what had happened on the road,
and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

Luke 24.35

Everything in this story, it seems, can be summed up in this verse. And this is where Christ shows up again and again: at the table where we gather, in the bread that we break. In the feast as well as in the simple fare, his presence persists and his blessing abides: waiting for us, staying with us, hungering to be known. And then we feel compelled to share this good news of God's presence.

So as we travel with Christ in this Easter season, may we approach our simple fare, our tables, our meals, and one another in a way that will open our eyes and help us to see and to know the Christ who lingers with us. When we leave the communion table, let us embrace that inner peace and eagerness that moves us each Sunday to be Christ's body in the world.

In closing, poet Jan Richardson helps us see that the blessing had already taken place on the Road to Emmaus as Jesus approached the two pilgrims. May we walk in the light of Jesus trusting in this blessing.

Emmaus Blessing

Already a blessing in the walking

already a blessing on the road

already a blessing drawing near

already a blessing in the listening

already a blessing in the burning hearts

already a blessing in the almost evening

already a blessing in the staying

already a blessing at the table

already a blessing in the bread

already a blessing in the breaking

already a blessing finally known

already a blessing *give us eyes*

already a blessing *let us see.*

Amen.

Resources

1. Rembrandt's Drawings and Etchings for the Bible; by Verlag Ernst Kaufmann, (Schwarzwalk); and Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt; 1963
2. Jan Richardson; paintedprayerbook.com/2011/05/05/easter-3-known/
3. rembrandt.louvre.fr/en/html/introduction.html



Oil Painting 1 (John 20:15b)

“Sir, if you have carried Jesus away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”



Drawing 2 (John 20:16)

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ which means Teacher.”



Oil Painting 3 (John 20:29b)

Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”



Drawing 4 (Luke 14:14-15)

That very day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, ...and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were doing so, Jesus himself drew near..."



Drawing 5 (Luke 24:27)

"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures concerning himself."



Drawing 6 (Luke 24:29)

"Stay with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is now far spent."



Etching 7 (Luke 24:30)

“When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.”



Oil Painting 7



Drawing 8 (Luke 24:31)

“And their eyes were opened and he recognized them; and he vanished out of their sight.”

This packet contains Rembrandt's (1606-1669) reflections through art on the appearances of Jesus to Mary, Thomas, and the travelers on the road to Emmaus to accompany Rev. Nanette Woodworth's sermon 4.19.26.

Etchings and Drawings are from Rembrandt's Drawings and Etchings for the Bible; by Verlag Ernst Kaufmann, (Schwarzwalk); and Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt; 1963

Oil paintings are from Google Images.

