

Seen and unseen at Emmaus

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The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a favorite of mine. I love the image of pilgrims traveling together, struggling to understand tragedy and loss. I love that Jesus enters the story as a pushy traveling companion who sidles up beside them and talks their ears off for the rest of the trip.

And I love that it's not Jesus' incisive exegesis of the promises in scripture that open the disciples' eyes to his identity. It is his presence with them at a shared meal—and the way he, the guest, presumes to pick up the bread, give thanks and offer it to them, the hosts—that finally tips them off.

But sometimes my favorite stories can feel too familiar, and I get stuck. Here are a couple of thoughts that gave me fresh eyes as I considered the Emmaus story this year.

First, Diego Velázquez's painting [The Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus](#) can prompt reflection on the story's themes of seeing and not seeing. The scene of Jesus and the disciples sits in the upper left corner of the canvas, while a kitchen maid stands at the center foreground. Her head is turned toward the scene of the meal behind her, where Jesus breaks the bread and the disciples finally, suddenly, recognize him:



Though the kitchen maid is at the center, her gaze draws the viewer's attention to the periphery, toward Jesus. And yet the scene of Jesus is much smaller and less finely detailed. Where are we to look? Who is the true subject of the painting? As we look around us in our daily lives, who do we most readily notice? Who is at the center of our vision and care, who lives at the periphery, and who might we overlook entirely?

Another thought: when Lent is over, I sometimes find myself missing the touchstone of my Lenten practice. Here's an idea for an Easter-season practice: take an "Emmaus walk" through the neighborhood where you live, the neighborhood surrounding your church, or another corner of your town you'd like to explore with new eyes. As you walk, look for signs of hope and new life, and reflect on how Christ is present or hidden in that place.

You might also consider including the practice of "[dislocated exegesis](#)" in your walk. After an initial walk through your neighborhood, consider: are there places where you struggle to see hope? Go back for a second walk, pause in those places to read a passage of scripture, and see if your perspective shifts.