A fascinating and perhaps troubling detail from our Gospel today is that no one really knows where the tiny village of Emmaus was, much less where it is today. Luke carefully tells us the village was “seven miles from Jerusalem,” but in what direction? Mind you, scores of tiny bedroom communities circled Jerusalem in our Lord’s Day. We know about Bethany and Bethlehem and can, with great accuracy, take you there today. But Emmaus presents a challenge either for anyone who wants or demands proof the village existed at all or for those of us who are just curious about this detail in the story.

As we learned, two of our Lord’s disciples—one named Cleopas and one unnamed— are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus in the late afternoon of that first Easter day. We might imagine they are walking into the sunset, down from the high ground of the Holy City, doing what people do as they walk along. They are a talking. The topic of their
conversation is what we would expect: they are turning over in their minds the events of the last few days involving their beloved teacher, our Lord Jesus Christ. Suddenly, the risen Lord joins them and their conversation as they walk along. “What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?” he asked. They stop in their tracks; dumbfounded by the apparent ignorance of their mysterious friend.

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” Seeming to play dumb, Jesus asks, “What things?” Without missing a beat or a step, they tell the story of our Lord’s betrayal, trial, crucifixion, and reported resurrection and appearances to disciples.

The “stranger” responds in an almost insulting way, “Oh, how foolish you are,” he said, “and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” He then offers them a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, reminding them that the Messiah had to suffer “and then enter into his glory.” St. Luke tells us, with Jesus reviewing the
teachings of Moses and all the prophets as they cover the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Lesson over, the three arrive at their destination, as the stranger seems about to walk on. They ask him to stay, and he accepts. Then, sitting at table, as our Lord breaks bread, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

Here is one of the more beautiful, touching stories in the entire Bible. But what if we have made more of Cleopas and his friend than the story warrants? Could we be hearing a story seasoned with judgment as much as a story infused with revelation and comfort? Where might the judgment be and why must we hear it?

The text suggests that these two disciples may have been walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus because, using an old expression, they needed to “get out of Dodge” before the sun went down. In other words, Cleopas and his friend were escaping Jerusalem, afraid that the fate that had met their Master would soon be theirs: a splintered cross and a cold
tomb. A possible reason for their escape to Emmaus – their terrifying fear that they too would be killed. Lest we be too hard on these men, they had every reason to fear for their lives. The Roman system of justice, particularly in occupied countries like Palestine, was swift and brutal. Less than 100 years earlier, the Roman general Pompeii had circled Jerusalem with crosses, executing thousands as enemies of the Empire.

Times are, we escape to the security of our own Emmaus because we feel threaten by some menace. A cancer diagnosis, being served divorce papers, a house fire, the loss of a job, or the crushing end to a long term friendship …all push us to Emmaus. We stagger down a lonely road, afraid to look back, praying we can “make it” to that safe place where a warm fire might soothe our troubled souls.

Other times, we escape to Emmaus because nothing inside of us seems to make sense anymore. Where once faith was vital and enriching, we meet confusion and more questions than all the answers in
the world could address. God who seemed close and caring is now distant and quiet or worse, seemingly angry and judgmental. These inside threats, demons that storm the citadel of our most private selves, may be the most terrifying of all. Why? Because no road, no retreat, no safe place can keep us from the things that go “bump” in the night of our own lonely selves.

So Emmaus is shorthand for the place of escape from threats without and within. Emmaus is the cute village, the warm fire, the cozy den, the comfortable nook we often glimpse on cards or adore in paintings, but never seem to find in our lives. We can book trips to the far ends of the earth or escape to weekends without end, wide in log cabins in the woods – even in our souls – only to discover that Emmaus may not even be real.

This leaves us with but one hope. And that hope is that no matter how sinister the threat or how ugly the past or even how terrifying the present, the risen One dares join us on the road, even when we are trying
to get away from everything we think would hurt us. He comes along side us, takes up our stride, walking at our pace. He speaks our name and asks if we know how much God loves us, what lengths God has gone to save us, and what price God has paid to redeem us.

We really do not know where Emmaus is today, but in another sense, we know its exact location, more certain than coordinates on our Garmin or phones GPS. Yes, we may hit the road, getting out of some Dodge of our own making or the rubble of some disaster brought us by the wiles and whims of raw living. But no matter why we flee or the direction we take, Jesus comes and walks with us and will never leave us without breaking bread and revealing himself to us.

Maybe you are on some escape route to Emmaus today. Maybe life has thrown you more curve balls and terror than any one life should have to endure. Maybe you have gone down more than a few foolish roads and made more than a few unwise decisions, all of which have put you on a cross of suffering. Like these first Easter travelers, look up and
see the risen and loving Lord who walks with you. Invite him to stay.

Let him feed you with broken bread and love you with nail-scarred hands.