

**The Road to Emmaus**  
 Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco  
 by  
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On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that football game, a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble **for** UCLA. Picking up the loose ball, he **lost** his direction and ran sixty-five yards toward the **wrong** goal line. One of his **own** teammates, Benny Lom, **had** to run him down and **tackle** him just before he reached the end zone and would have scored a touchdown for the **opposing** Georgia Tech team! UCLA was forced to punt. Georgia Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, taking the lead, **demoralizing** the UCLA team. This strange play came early in the game. At halftime the UCLA players filed off the field and into the dressing room. They sat around on benches and the floor. But Riegels put a blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, and put his face in his hands. You could **barely** hear a pin drop in that locker room. When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes left before playing time, Coach Price looked at the team and said, "Men, the **same** team that played the first half will start the second." The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He didn't **budge**. The coach looked back and called to him. Riegels didn't **move**. Coach Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The **same** team that played the first half will start the second." Roy Riegels looked up, his cheeks wet with tears. "Coach, he said, "I can't do it. I've **ruined** you. I've ruined the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't **face** that crowd out there." Coach Price reached out, put his hands on Riegels' shoulder, and said, " We still have the second half to play. **Get up and go** on back! Roy, the game is not **over**!"

The disciples in our Gospel, like Roy Riegels, were traveling in the **wrong** direction. They had fumbled and were running **away** from Jerusalem to Emmaus, thinking the game of Jesus' ministry was over. Now 3 different places in the Holy Land claim to be the village of Emmaus. Biblical scholars point out there is no record of any village called Emmaus in any classical source and the **only** place Emmaus is mentioned in **all** ancient writings is in Luke. But that's okay, since it seems **almost** as if Emmaus is **more** a state of mind. Emmaus is that place where we go, to get **away** from it all, a place you can **escape**, so you don't have think about how **lousy** life can sometimes be, or a place we can retreat in order to lick our wounds and wonder what went **wrong**. Maybe it's the mall, a bar, a hike in the woods, the movies, the TV remote, a youtube video or an app on your smartphone. The Easter stories never **directly** answer the question "How did the resurrection really happen?" The Gospel writers ask the better question, "**Where** does Easter happen in our lives?" These two disciples, one named Cleopas and the other, according to biblical experts, probably his wife, because unfortunately, she is **not**

named, had had their hopes **dashed**. They had left **everything** to follow Jesus their leader whom they had loved and now he had died a shameful, **cursed** death. You can sense the **despair** in their every step and word. If it had been available then, they would have been popping **Prozac** pills in their mouths by the **handfuls**. They had thought Jesus would restore rule to Israel and make life **better**, but now their dreams for a brighter, more **just** tomorrow had died along with Jesus. They felt they had made a major **mistake** in following Jesus. How could they have gotten things so **wrong**? They had to get out of town, as it was too **painful** to stay there, with their grief intensified as Jerusalem was returning to business as usual, becoming like a house after someone dies, being both **empty** of that person and too **full** of memories. Some women in their group had told them a **wild** story about a missing body and angels, but from their **downtrodden** tone, the two disciples did not believe them. Initially, **we** want to **scream** at the two disciples—can't you see it's **Jesus** who is standing right in **front** of you? The text doesn't say that Jesus was in disguise or that he was playing tricks on them, only that their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Perhaps the two disciples could only remember a **dead** Jesus, with the possibility of a **risen** Jesus incomprehensible to them. They were so focused on their **own** grief and disappointment, they **rebuked** Jesus for **his** ignorance, when **they** were the ones who **didn't** understand. But as Jesus explained the Scriptures to them and broke bread with them, they began to realize, God had a **new** plan. When evil seems like it has **victored**, God **trumps** it all, with Easter being the **greatest** turnaround and the most **unexpected** event in **all** history. Imagine their **shock** when Jesus tells Cleopas and his wife that the **same** team of disciples who had **failed** and fled from the cross, were going to start the second half of the game and would be the instruments **God** had chosen to usher in the new kingdom. God had not suffered a **setback** in the crucifixion, but was fulfilling and achieving **exactly** what God had set out to do from the beginning. Just when you **think** you know the end of the story, God brings **new** possibilities and hope. The game is **not** over till God says it's over and the God of resurrection **always** has the **last** word!

The **good** news from our gospel is that it may be **in** Emmaus where we are most likely to find Jesus. Although the two disciples did not recognize him, **he** recognized them and saw them, as if they were the **only** two people in the world in need. Whether we recognize Jesus or not, **new life** is still the object of the game, so he walks a little way with us, along whatever **rocky** road we are traveling. A Protestant woman pastor friend told me this **true** story recently about Kathy, diagnosed with a virus attacking her kidneys called pylonephritis, with doctors trying everything to treat her complications, but she was resistant to every antibiotic they gave her. Then they ran out of possible antibiotics, plus the year before she had been diagnosed with **MS**. She was so **weak** she could not walk up the stairs and her white blood cell count was over 100,000. She was given a **month** to live. But Kathy wanted to live, so as a **mother** she could raise her young children. Now she is a **normal** woman not weird, or prone to delusions. She

attended a healing service where people would pray to Jesus that her body would be cured. She said, “Jesus was my **only** hope. I had **nowhere** else to go.” As she was being prayed for, Kathy felt the presence of Jesus in the form of electricity **running** all through her body and in that instant she **knew** she was well. When she got back home, her husband, who was a medical doctor, said, “You have color in your face for the first time in **months!**” She had so much energy she literally **ran** up the stairs that had been **impossible** to climb just that morning. When she went to her own doctor, her white blood cell count was 0, and there was no trace of the virus in her body. Her MS was gone and has **never** recurred. She felt such gratitude that she wanted to help suffering people and began to reach out to poor families in her county. So many referrals were made to her, that she and her husband founded a Good Will clinic where the poor could receive **free** medical care. So many lives have been saved and improved by that clinic! The game is **not** over and God says I’ve got another move to make and it’s called **new life, hope, victory!** We may be burdened down or abused by the circumstances and events in life with little to live for or to look forward to, whether it be a divorce, a relationship gone sour, illness, financial strain, loneliness, or addiction. No matter how **dark** it gets, God’s presence and love is **greater** than **any** hurt or despair staring us in the face. When we feel we can’t go on, we are **not** alone, as Jesus **still** travels with us, often with surprises along the way. With Jesus a **new** day has dawned, **new** possibilities are born, the game is **not** over! The two disciples had been caught in a world of **If Only**. **If only** Jesus had not gone to Jerusalem; **if only** Roman justice had prevailed against the mob, **if only** Judas had not betrayed Jesus. We know these feelings...**if only** I had believed more deeply or prayed harder. **If only** I had been smarter or acted more sensibly...**if only** I knew **then** what I know **now!** The world of **If Only** is filled with endless questioning, mired in disappointment, suffocated with self-guilt, and covered with pain. These thoughts and feelings keep us from seeing God **right** beside us. They convey the **false** idea that God is **helpless** in our situation, that when sickness, suffering, or tragedy comes our way, God is **powerless** to act. **If Only** whispers the lie that God has abandoned us to our foolishness, that God’s love and goodness is only ours, **if** we think, act, or feel in ways **acceptable** to God. Yet our gospel tells us Jesus will **never** be a stranger to us, even when we are taken over by the noisy traffic of the world and **consumed** by worry. He will **never** give up on us or abandon us to our failures, sickness, heartache, or grief, even if we **are** running in the **wrong** direction, because God has claimed each **one** of us as his **own**. The Gospel is not that God is there for us **only** if we **never** fail or that God will love us **only** if we do **right**. The **great** news is that Jesus comes to us **precisely** when we feel lost, are caught up in broken promises, unrealized dreams, failed regrets, or suffering heartache. **Our** difficulties become **God’s** opportunities!

Nick Vujcic was born with Tetra-amelia, a **rare** disorder, in which he was missing **both** arms at shoulder level, as well as having **no** legs. His feet were toeless, except for 2 toes on one foot. Born in Brisbane, Australia, he became one

of the **first** disabled students integrated into a mainstream school, once his parents lobbied to change the laws. Bullied at school by other kids and teased by adults, Nick grew despondent and by age 8 was **already** thinking about suicide. He became **bitter** towards God after praying to grow arms and legs and it didn't happen. In his early teen years he tried to **drown** himself in 6 inches of water. A key turning point came when his **mother** showed him a newspaper article about a man dealing with a severe disability. He realized he wasn't **alone** in his struggle and began to embrace and transcend his disability, by mastering the daily tasks of life. He learned to write using the 2 toes on his left foot with a **special** grip that slid onto his big toe, as well as how to use a computer and type using the "heel and toe method." He taught himself how to throw tennis balls, get himself a glass of water, and brush his teeth. Despite his pain and struggles, he decided to try **trusting** God again. And God transformed this "so-called" **mistake** into a preacher and motivational speaker who travels around the world and started his own nonprofit organization, Life Without Limbs, at age 17. **Startling** pictures of Nick with his small body perched **precariously** on an electric wheelchair are overshadowed by the **huge** infectious **smile** on his face! His first book, *Life Without Limbs: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life*, was published last year and he produced a DVD for young people entitled, *No Arms, No Legs, No Worries*. He writes, "If God can use a man **without** arms and legs to be his hands and feet, then God will certainly use any **willing** heart. If God doesn't give **you** a miracle, **you** can be a miracle to someone else." The game is **not** over and God **always** has the last word.

Just as we notice a transformation in Nick and Kathy, there was a **complete** reversal in attitudes of the two disciples when Jesus opened **their** eyes. Their slumped postures and defeats were converted into a **rock solid** stance of strength and confidence... a **raging** fire burned inside them, a **new** passion was excited... their sadness was changed to joy, their fears relieved, their hopes restored. They practically **ran** the 7 miles back to Jerusalem in the **middle** of the night! And Jesus essentially having given them the first Easter sermon, instructs them that his death was **not** the end of their journey with him. Through their encounters with the **living** words of Scripture, their **faith** community of fellow believers celebrating the Eucharist together, and their **willingness** to extend hospitality and **welcome** to the stranger on the road, that in **those** places particularly, but **not** limited to them alone, would Jesus' presence still be with them. The breaking of the bread was in some sense the **broken** pieces of their stories and it was given back to them as **whole** new lives. The God of Jesus brings life to our places of death no matter how dark or cluttered the area, even if we fail to recognize that presence. The God of new beginnings is always leading us to victory pulling us through, guiding every step of the journey we take, because Jesus has walked **every** step **before** us and now walks **with** us. Jesus may have in the end disappeared from the two disciples' sight, but he did not **disappear** from their **lives**. And just as in the case of Kathy and Nick, he does not disappear from **our** lives, even if like Roy Riegels,

we may be running in the **wrong** direction. God's **Easter** peace, love, and joy are available to us right **now**, exactly as we **are**, however wounded we may be. My sisters and brothers, the game is **not** over and the God of resurrection **always** has the **last** word!