

Entry #93 (“ . . . and their eyes were opened”)

Many years ago I was giving a retreat to a small group of English-speaking sisters of the Roman Catholic faith in a church on a high hill east of Jerusalem in Israel. Below the church in a deep valley was a small village of Muslims. On a hill to the north was a summer camp for young Jewish boys. It was said, perhaps inaccurately, that when the Ark of the Covenant was in its way to Jerusalem that the high hill on which the church existed served as a resting place for the Ark for a while. Be that as it may, on the final day of the retreat I had the sisters reflect and pray on the meeting of the two disciples of Jesus with the Risen Jesus as they walked to the village of Emmaus, and their finally recognizing him at the “breaking of bread” (Luke 24,13-35). After my presentation the local superior of the sisters who were making the retreat (but who was not herself making the retreat) came to me and said that she had engaged a local driver to drive her and me to a spot on a road from Jerusalem to Tel-Aviv that she said was locally considered the site of the village of Emmaus, where the Risen Jesus broke bread and was recognized by the two disciples. The site was in a deep valley, and separated from the main road by a ditch and a mound. Between the ditch and the high wall of the canyon was a wide spot of about two acres. There were a couple of buildings on the spot and a bulldozer. We were pondering what to do when a car drove up and a man emerged who turned out to be the owner of the property. When he saw us looking at his property he became furious and began shouting at us to leave. The sister with me patiently explained that we were Christians who wanted to examine a spot that may have had a special role in the life of Jesus. When the man heard this his attitude changed immediately. He invited us to have a cup of coffee with him. He explained that he had recently bought the property and was renting the bulldozer to clean up the rubbish he said was littering the ground. The hearts of the sister and me sank as we heard him speak of the “rubbish”, but there was nothing we could do. She told the man that I was a visitor and that we would have to return to our quarters because twilight was coming. So back we returned to the church and the sisters making the retreat where another retreat conference was scheduled for me. But from that moment on the walk of the two disciples with the stranger, and their recognizing the Risen Jesus at the breaking of the bread, will never be the same as it once was. **(James Swetnam. S.J. March 30, 2022)**