everything [in] between: hidden & revealed - Stephanie Sorge, 5.4.25

I recently saw a cartoon depicting the Last Supper. Jesus is standing, giving his farewell address, and he says, “One of you will betray me. One of you will deny me. And four of you will get book deals.” Those guys might have started out as relative unknowns, but they rose to become the A-team: disciples-turned-apostles. But Jesus had many disciples, not only those twelve. His companions formed a gender-diverse group. All genders found a place at Jesus’s table, and each person was a disciple in their own right. So why has most of the church, for much of its history, focused on the men? Good question, Stephanie, I’m glad you asked! The short answer is patriarchy. And it matters.

My dad’s parents lived as disciples of Jesus for a combined 187 years! They were both Pastors. Of course, he was addressed as Pastor Sorge and she was Sister Sorge, but she was also a licensed minister. They knew the Bible, inside and out, but the first time my grandmother heard a more inclusive Bible translation, addressing “brothers *and* sisters,” she said that it made her feel even more like she was included in those holy words. I still remember the holy surprise in her voice.

I felt a similar kind of holy surprise when studying this familiar passage last week. I’ve always loved this story. It feels intimate, alive, and personal. It’s always struck me that this extended encounter with Jesus after the resurrection centers disciples other than the Twelve - or the Eleven, at that point. Here’s where my mind was blown. There’s a solid, scholarly case to be made that the second, unnamed disciple on this journey was a woman - Cleopas’ wife. That adds a familial intimacy to this whole exchange, in addition to changing the gender dynamics.

Then there’s the statement, “Some women from our group have left us stunned…” “Our group.” Their group - the closest disciples of Jesus who were gathered and grieving - was mixed-gender. Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. Not after the stories of Martha, distracted by her many tasks of ministry, and Mary, getting a prime seat by the teacher. Women were with Jesus from the beginning to the end, full-fledged disciples. They were early leaders in the church, full stop. But centuries of patriarchal leadership and tradition have left many of them hidden, if not erased. Those forces are still at work, and in our country, there is more political and economic power behind them than there has been for a long time.

In this story, the identity of Jesus is first hidden, and then revealed - to the whole, diverse community. But for too long, the church has hidden that diversity, and even tried to erase it. Jesus’s choice to come to these lesser-known disciples - a man and woman - makes a statement that we are also included in these stories. Jesus reaches out to all disciples - not just the ones with canonical gospels that bear their names. Not only the disciples with particular anatomical or chromosomal configurations. Jesus came to the hurting and depressed, the ones who had lost hope. He went outside of the city center, outside of the halls of power and economic dominance. And all of those people were included in the community. They were full members of the body of Christ.

This story is also remarkable because it shows us how central and critical the community was. After Jesus died, they gathered together. When Cleopas and his wife had broken bread with Jesus, they immediately got back on the road to Jerusalem. They had to tell the others. They had to *be* with their community. That was a huge source of strength and comfort. Without the early community, there would be no church today. Jesus entrusted his ongoing work of ministry to the community who remained. Once his body was no longer with them, they became the body of Christ. The same body of which we are a part.

What if Jesus’s visit to Cleopas and his wife was also a way of nudging them back into that community? They had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem God’s people. Had they lost hope? If Jesus hadn’t appeared to them, would they have just remained in Emmaus, going back to life as it was before their hope had been awakened? But once he left, they went immediately, even though the day was almost over. They heard the new accounts from other disciples, and they shared their own encounter. And then Jesus showed up again - in the midst of that gathered body.

The body of Christ is a potent, renewable source of hope. When we are in the depths of despair, depression, grief, or defeat, it can be harder to make ourselves connect with others, even if that’s what we most need. We don’t want to put on a happy face, but we also don’t want to fall apart in a weepy mess. Maybe we need to talk, or maybe that’s the last thing we want. Maybe we need a hug, and maybe we need to slip out without having to interact. The church needs to be a space and a community that has room for all of that, for the full diversity of humanity to be included in the fully authentic way each person can show up. We need that kind of community now more than ever.

It’s not just safe space we’re holding; we’re creating brave space. Showing up as our authentic and diverse selves takes courage. Creating this space together gives us the courage to move from it and go back into the world, continuing to follow the work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is still calling us together as the body of Christ today, and still showing up where two or three are gathered. We are called into community that is noticeably different from the structures of the world around us. This community is diverse. It is equitable. And it reflects the inclusive love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. It is also authentic. Christ breaks bread with us when we are hungry - for food or for hope. Christ shares the cup with us when we thirst - when our bodies or souls are parched. We’re fed at this table, and within this community. All are welcome. All.