



EN ROUTE TO EMMAUS

Robert Zund (1826-1909)

Commentary by Edward Riojas

It would be an understatement to say that Easter has staying power. Christ's resurrection and our following the First Born from the dead changes everything. Ramifications of Jesus' redemptive act are far reaching, and the Easter season's length enables Christians to soak in as much as our puny minds allow. Then again, perhaps the season isn't long enough.

I love different aspects of events surrounding that first Easter, one of which is the little excursion to Emmaus by a couple of clueless and dejected disciples who find themselves joined by a third party. The account is loaded with massively-significant things – walking and conversing intimately with a very real Jesus, urging this “Stranger” to stay with them, being finally aware of His [real] presence in the breaking of the bread, and so on. Personally, I love the disciples' retrospective assessment of the trip, “Did not our hearts burn within us?”

Arguably, one of the most recognizable images of that Emmaus trip was painted by Swiss artist, Robert Zünd. Reproductions of the piece found

their way decades ago into church basements and parishioner's houses and parochial school offices, and have lingered in the minds of many. In the painting, Christ gestures heavenward, as He tries to bring the two men up to speed. The trio is nearly swallowed by foliage of what is obviously a European forest. Dappled sunlight plays with trees, the winding path, and a little brook. The image is perhaps outdated and a bit on the trite side, but we know it well.

Zünd was a gifted artist of middling fame that worked in the shadows of heavy hitters and the avant garde of the late 1800s. His middle class upbringing allowed him to study under solid artists, but his resume did not include top Parisian schools or travels to Italy, and his interpretation of the Emmaus event was eclipsed by Caravaggio's and Rembrandt's earlier versions of their esthetically superior "Supper at Emmaus."

But like Easter, Zünd's piece stays with us. It shows the disciples at their clueless worst when they yet did not recognize Christ, and that easily resonates with those of us who still stumble along this side of paradise, ignorant that Christ has been alongside us the whole way; ignorant that He has been enlightening us by His Word. We read Holy Scripture and still moan, "Lord, where are You?"

We're not just clueless – we are sinful. Our hearts are usually elsewhere. We sometimes allow interests to burn in unhealthy places, while we ignore the real presence of our Lord and Savior in our lives.

But thanks be to God that, by Christ's death and resurrection, we have been freed from our bondage to sin. We are encouraged by the Spirit, and urge Jesus to tarry with us a while longer. Someday we will think back on our own uncertain paths, remember the events following that first Easter, and join with all the saints in confessing, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road?"