

Our Walk to Emmaus by Brian Webster

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It's a privilege to be here with you tonight as we celebrate Easter. I am so grateful that this church — Third Church of Christ, Scientist, New York City — is making this possible because Easter is so important for us to understand, whether you are a Christian or belong to another faith.

It is our love of the Bible and the teachings of Christ Jesus that have brought us together tonight. But isn't it also the light that a remarkable woman, Mary Baker Eddy, shines on the Scriptures through her discovery of Christian Science and her seminal work, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*? Her revelation, as laid out in this book, has made the Scriptures come alive with meaning in a way that has special relevance for us on this occasion.

I'm aware that most of you listening to this talk are Christian Scientists, but many of you are not. While many of the citations in this talk come from the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, the concepts addressed tonight apply not only to Christian Science but to any denomination, and the many references to "church" can apply equally to all places of worship.

Let me start by saying it's wonderful to be celebrating Easter with you. It's such an important holiday. But it's also Good Friday. I've been thinking about that name — "Good Friday." It seems odd to call it "good" because history tells us that it was one of the darkest moments in human history.

From all biblical accounts, Jesus' followers weren't celebrating. Their hopes and expectations had been dashed in a most traumatic fashion. They witnessed the worst of human nature being unleashed on a man who exhibited the best in human nature — whose entire ministry was founded on the principle of love. He taught of a God who is Love itself, and he gave all mankind a timeless invitation to join him in experiencing and sharing this love, and the people turned on him. To Jesus' followers, his crucifixion was a loss of the highest magnitude.

But something unimaginably good was about to come out of it — what Mary Baker Eddy described as Jesus' "... proof of his final triumph over body and matter... evidence so important to mortals" (SH 42:16).

This truly is worth celebrating, and that's why we're here tonight. It's unfortunate that this triumph had to come through what, by all human standards, looked like a brutal and final ending to a promising life. But as we have come to see, it wasn't an ending at all. It was

the beginning of mankind's liberation from the baneful effects of mortal thinking, including all suffering from sin, sickness, disease, and death.

We now know that almost every detail of the passion week had been precisely foretold in prophecy, and according to that prophecy, the best was yet to come. Isaiah had declared 700 years earlier that God would "... swallow up on this mountain, the covering that is cast over all peoples, He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth," (Isa. 25:7, 8, ESV).

Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection were the fulfillment of this. It announced to the world — even to those who didn't understand it, and to this day still don't — that resurrection awaits each one of us; that we really can put off the old man that we read about in Ephesians and "... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:24). Jesus' resurrection, like all of his teachings, was rich with purpose for all of us.

To Christian Scientists, this is the true significance of Easter. The crucifixion was only the beginning of what is arguably the most glorious event in human history — Jesus' resurrection. Didn't his resurrection show us that...

- All the prophecies about the Messiah, including the Church Triumphant, were true and continue to this day?
- That Jesus' teachings were not only true, but repeatable — even scientific?
- That his promises were not based on human hope, but were based on an eternal, demonstrable Principle that is accessible to all of us?
- And didn't it also show us that an understanding of this Principle gives each of us the ability to demonstrate for ourselves
 - the divine Life that overcomes death,
 - the divine Truth that heals sickness, sin, and disease, and
 - the divine Love that governs the world with peace and harmony?

Wouldn't you agree that this is worth celebrating?

But if all this is true, then we might ask ourselves, where are the celebrators today? Where are all the people who should be flocking to our churches and rejoicing with us for these timeless and priceless gifts? It doesn't matter what church or denomination you belong to. Why are these places of worship awash in empty pews, empty treasuries, and empty Sunday schools when the blessings they have to give to mankind are so much more rewarding, enriching, and fulfilling than anything the world has to offer? Who is celebrating now?

It would appear that the world is moving in the opposite direction.

- In 2020, a Gallup survey reported that only 47% — less than half! — of U.S. adults belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 70% in 1999.

- According to a British Social Attitudes survey that same year, in the UK only 5% of the population were regular church attendees.

Most surveys over the last 40 years show an alarming trend of growing disinterest in organized religion.

These are frightening statistics for churches — even more unsettling when we consider that just a couple of generations ago, in the Christian Science denomination at least, churches were opening all over the world at an astounding pace. Its growth was so noticeable that it was a frequent subject in the media. But today, even the Christian Science church has not been able to escape the general trends just mentioned. With signs of decline so prevalent, one might be forgiven for asking the question, “Is the celebration over?”

The answer is: It depends on which church you are seeing. Are you seeing the church the world sees, defined by pews and spires? Or the church Jesus said is built on the rock, against which “the gates of hell shall not prevail” (Matt. 16:18)?

When Jesus said this to Peter, he wasn’t making a case for two churches, but one — the Church Universal that is not made nor measured by human means — “...flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.” This church is of God. It is literally God speaking to mankind, manifesting His love for us, and us feeling and reflecting that love in our lives. Jesus was telling his students that this is the church they must see, the church within each one of us, not the material counterfeit of church that is subject to mortal discord, decline, and dissolution. Just as Peter had to learn this, so do we. This message is for all mankind.

The Disciples’ Walk to Emmaus

We can learn a lot about seeing this real church from two unassuming disciples of Jesus, Cleopas and an unnamed friend. These disciples had traveled with Jesus as part of the larger sphere of disciples that followed him. They had witnessed many of Jesus’ healings, heard his sermons, and may even have had some success themselves in healing. But they had just witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion and the social agitation that led up to it.

Leaving Jerusalem and feeling that the prophecies that were so foundational to Jesus’ ministry were possibly empty promises, these disciples found themselves grappling with a profound mismatch between their expectations of the Messiah and the thought of their Master’s crucifixion. Like most Jews, they may have anticipated that the Messiah would be a political savior, possibly a great warrior, who would deliver Israel from Roman oppression. Instead, they witnessed what appeared to be the humiliating and tragic death of their Master, which seemed to contradict even messianic prophecy.

The disciples were also grappling with conflicting reports about Jesus’ resurrection. Some women from their group claimed that they had seen him alive after the crucifixion, but these disciples hadn’t seen him, and the reported sightings seemed highly improbable. All of their expectations of the Messiah were unraveling because of Jesus’ apparent death.

Then something interesting happened as they left Jerusalem for Emmaus. We read in the Bible that "... it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them" (Luke 24:15).

Jesus? Really? The Jesus they knew died on the cross days before as far as they knew. His promises of raising himself after three days hadn't come to pass. They hadn't seen him. Their minds couldn't process the possibility that that same man might walk right up to them and join them on their walk. So convinced were they of the impossibility of Jesus appearing that they didn't even recognize who was right in front of them. Luke tells us, "... their eyes were holden that they should not know him" (Luke 24:16). In other words, their thought was closed, or at least obscured, by what appeared to them to be the death of their master.

Then this stranger, Jesus, began to probe. According to the New Living Translation, he asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?" They stopped short. Then Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days."

"What things?" Jesus asked.

"The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth," they said. "He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel."

They went on...

"Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report. They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive! Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said."

Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?"

Then, starting with Moses and continuing all the way through to the prophets, Jesus proceeded to open their eyes to the prophecies that foretold the coming of the Messiah. For his entire ministry he had been showing them that the Messiah had always been here if they would just see it — that would be the coming — but they expected to see it in a human form. They had always thought that it was him.

Jesus and the Christ

Now, it might be helpful before we go any further to explain the distinction, made by Christian Science, between Jesus and the Christ, or Jesus and the Messiah. Christ and Messiah are two names for the same thing. Christ is the Greek word and Messiah is the Hebrew.

Jesus once said, "I and my father are one" (John 10:30). While some denominations interpret this to mean that Jesus was saying that he was God, the biblical record suggests otherwise. Jesus said, "... He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me" (John 12:44). He often spoke to God as his Father, even addressing Him as Abba, an affectionate name for a father. We read that Jesus went unto his Father, he prayed to his Father, confessed before his Father, and spoke of doing the will of his Father. So when he said "I and my father are one," it must have been in the sense that his ideals and nature were the same as, or one with, his Father, God. Jesus was expressing the Christ, or Messiah, God's nature, to mankind.

Mary Baker Eddy explains in her book, *Unity of Good*, "Jesus came to earth; but the Christ (that is, the divine idea of the divine Principle which made heaven and earth) was never absent from the earth and heaven; hence the phraseology of Jesus, who spoke of the Christ as one who came down from heaven, yet as 'the Son of man which is in heaven.' (John iii. 13.) By this we understand Christ to be the divine idea brought to the flesh in the son of Mary" (p. 59:5).

By distinguishing between the Christ, the divine idea of the divine Principle, God, and Jesus, the man who lived and embodied the Christ so perfectly, Christian Science removes the impediment that says we can never aspire to be like him. Mrs. Eddy's revelation of his spiritual nature and the purpose of his mission revealed for us the power behind his great works. It was the Christ. This power was not exclusive to him, but is reflected by all mankind. We have in Jesus a life-model that all people should strive to emulate. Remember that he said, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also" (John 14:12).

That the man—Jesus—should also be called Messiah is understandable. Mrs. Eddy points out that, "... he was specially endowed with the Holy Spirit; for he was given the new name, Messiah, or Jesus Christ, — the God-anointed; even as, at times of special enlightenment, Jacob was called Israel; and Saul, Paul" (Mis. 161:22).

I bring this up now because these two disciples on their walk to Emmaus had not yet made the distinction between the Christ, or Messiah, and Jesus. For three years, Jesus had been telling them that the Messiah had already come — in fact, had always been here. Yet the disciples were still identifying it as a human form, so when Jesus was crucified, so were their hopes. At this moment, their minds were so obscured by discouragement that they didn't even realize that they were standing in the presence of the Messiah.

Since the time was getting late, the disciples prevailed upon their fellow traveler to stay with them for the night, and at dinner something extraordinary happened. We read that "...their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:31, 32).

Jesus opened their eyes to the Scriptures — all the teachings and prophecies that spoke of the coming of the Christ. They now understood that the Christ Jesus spoke of was eternal, without a physical body. And that's why Jesus disappeared from their sight.

This changed everything. Suddenly, all of the promises from the Old Testament made sense. Their understanding was illumined and their faith uplifted. With this newborn understanding of what was really going on, they returned to Jerusalem to share the news with their fellow disciples who were hiding from the Roman magistrates. This was an event worth celebrating! Prophecy had been right.

Our Walk to Emmaus

This story of two disciples struggling with the seeming failure of Jesus' ministry, and their attempt to make sense of conflicting evidence, resonates with our churches today. Young people questioning their faith and walking away from their churches isn't that different from the confusion and disillusionment these two disciples were experiencing.

People who are leaving their churches today often do so because of the stark gap between the idealized version of their faith and what they see in their church and the world. The perceived inability of church teachings to heal them or to fix the scourges of today — racial conflict, natural disasters, wars, climate, political division, and a slew of other issues — have no doubt contributed to a feeling of disillusionment and helplessness. The volume and velocity with which disturbing news and opinions can be shared today have contributed to a generation of young people who feel less of a connection with religion and a growing dependence on material supports. So ill-equipped are young people to reconcile their faith with their experience that social media is literally replacing religion as a place of refuge and a source of solutions for life's challenges.

Doesn't this sometimes make you feel like you're the one drifting down the road, looking over your shoulder and thinking about the glory days of yesteryear when churches could hardly be built fast enough to accommodate peoples' appetite for spiritual growth? And don't you occasionally, wistfully, long for those glory days to return? Have you ever found yourself thinking that if Jesus or Mrs. Eddy were here today, our churches would be more alive?

Many of us have. Now, there's nothing wrong with celebrating the past success of our church. But we can't move forward while looking backward.

In many ways, we all are on a modern-day walk to Emmaus, wondering if the glory days of our church are over. It's an individual walk, but it has become a collective walk. So what can we learn from the disciples' experience?

What did the disciples think?

Imagine what was going through the minds of the two disciples as they spoke with Jesus on the road that day. The coming of the Messiah had been prophesied by Moses 1300 years earlier. But prophecies of what would accompany its coming were never far from the thoughts of the Jews. They were taught to believe that:

- Messiah was going to deliver the people from foreign rule and oppression. It would restore the Kingdom of Israel to its former glory (2 Samuel 7:12-13).
- There would be an end of war and violence and a world where justice and righteousness would prevail, benefiting all peoples, not just the Jews (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3-4).
- There would be an end of the diaspora and a reuniting of exiled Jews from all around the world (Isaiah 11:12).
- There would be universal peace and even the Gentiles would be drawn to worship Israel's god (Zech 8:23).
- There would be a new covenant between God and His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).
- The temple in Jerusalem would be rebuilt (Ezekiel 40-48)

Did any of this happen? No, at least as far as they could see at that moment. As far as they were concerned, the prophecies had failed them. Things looked pretty dismal. But were they?

As that day drew on, it dawned on the disciples that they were in the presence of something extraordinary. This was no stranger who was talking to them. It was the very man they were convinced had died on the cross and whose ministry, for all its promise, had died with him.

And how did the stranger reveal himself to these men? Did he come right out and say "Hey, guys! I'm the Messiah y'all have been waiting for?" No. Why didn't he? Because it is never the nature of the Messiah to be revealed by fanfare. The Messiah, or Christ, that Jesus revealed to us, is not a person. It is an idea, the Christ that is always here! Christ doesn't suddenly appear out of nowhere. It dawns in consciousness, whenever it is welcomed in. Christ reveals itself by healing — by sinful hearts repenting, health restored, and the dead rising.

And now it happened again. Without fanfare, Jesus simply did what he promised he would do — he rose again after three days in the tomb. What greater announcement could there be than to prove Christ's victory over "the last enemy that shall be destroyed..." (I Cor. 15:26)?

With this, Jesus disappeared from their presence, but not for long. The two men ran back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the eleven disciples. And as they did so, who should they find standing in their midst but Jesus himself!

This changed their perception of the Messiah. The Messiah hadn't died on the cross. The continuity of the Christ was assured. Everything their eyes were telling them about what was happening in Jerusalem had been wrong. The prophecies were right. This was not an ending, but a beginning — the beginning of a movement that would ultimately reach around the world and change the course of history.

Luke wrote, "...thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46, 47).

The disciples' walk to Emmaus turns out to be surprisingly similar to where many religions find themselves today. We are in the midst of a modern-day walk to Emmaus, and we are the disciples who have left Jerusalem. I would posit that just as thoughts of despair, doubt, and discouragement kept the two disciples from seeing the Messiah who was right in front of them, so thoughts of despair, doubt, and discouragement are keeping us from seeing the real church that is right before us. So let's see what we can learn from their experience.

What is right before us?

The disciples had failed to recognize that the Messiah had come because they had confused the message with the messenger. They confused Christ, the spiritual idea that Jesus came to reveal, with Jesus, the representative of that idea to mankind. Therefore, when they thought Jesus had died on the cross, so did their hopes of the Messiah's coming.

A similar phenomenon infects our churches today. Those who are on this walk today are confusing the idea of church that is always with us — what Mrs. Eddy said "...is designed to be built on the Rock of Christ ... to reflect the Church Triumphant" (Man. 19:2–3) — with the buildings we call our church, which are the human expression of that idea to mankind. As a result, some believe the health of our church is measured by the state of the physical churches where we congregate, or the state of the society in which we live.

This confusion between the idea of church and the buildings that represent it was on full display in Jesus' day when his disciples saw the magnificent temple in Jerusalem. To them, its beauty and grandeur was a sign of the prosperity of their theology. So impressed were they with what they saw that they excitedly showed Jesus the buildings of the great temple. And what did he say? "See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:1, 2). They were looking at the same thing, but where the disciples saw a temporal structure, Jesus saw a spiritual one.

Jesus' students saw the temple through a material lens. Is that the lens through which we see our churches? We look at the building; its location; the number of seats, attendees, students, and visitors. We look at the size of our collections; the size of our treasury; the number of years it's been here. We think this defines our church. But isn't this a wholly temporal concept? There is nothing of lasting value there.

Jesus impressed upon his disciples the importance of keeping the spiritual concept always in mind despite what their eyes and human logic were telling them, and he acknowledged that his view was starkly different from what the masses were seeing. He said,

"Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: For I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them" (Luke 10:23, 24).

Nowhere in Jesus' teachings do we hear him advocating for building a physical church or temple. But he was advocating for acknowledging the Church Triumphant — the church that appeared to Peter in his proclamation to Jesus.

The real church is how God is being manifested to us today. It is our tribute to Him for all He gives to mankind, and it is man flourishing in the knowledge of His presence. The Bible is a record of God's appearing to mankind. He appeared to Cleopas and his friend when He revealed the Messiah to them. He appeared to David and gave him strength to say to Goliath "I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. ... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel" (I Sam. 17:45,46). God appeared to Abraham when he was going to sacrifice his son, Isaac; to Moses at the Red Sea; to the Hebrew boys when they were thrown into the furnace. These were all examples of church, the expression of divine Principle manifesting itself to mankind. Mrs. Eddy said that "Man shines by borrowed light" (Ret. 57:15). That light is the glorious realization of the ever-presence of church.

Christ doesn't just appear. Christ is always present. Its appearance refers to those times when we are receptive to His presence. Sometimes we aren't. The awareness of its presence sometimes falls on stony ground where it doesn't take root and bear fruit.

This has been the case throughout the centuries when materialism and fear so dominated peoples' thinking that they could not recognize what was right before them. And we're dealing with that today. Health concerns, pandemics, political divisions, financial insecurity, body obsession — these render our hearts incapable of hearing God's word. They deprive God of His glory, and deprive us of His kingdom.

But look what can happen when we see it, reclaim it, embrace it, love it, and share it. Jesus introduced the kingdom to a small group of followers and Christianity spread throughout the world. Peter preached to a crowd in Jerusalem and 3,000 people accepted the message, were baptized, and joined the early church. Mrs. Eddy revealed the Kingdom to a small group of New Englanders and her church grew into an international movement. This has happened over and over in history when the Word falls on good soil.

The receptive heart is the one not impressed by the materialism of the age. A receptive heart is one that realizes that the real church is within us — that:

- Church is a spiritual idea, unconstrained by physical structure and immune to suggestions of trends, age, or decline.
- Church is the presence of divine Love impelling us to love God, good, and to love our brothers and sisters as we would want them to love us.
- Church is the power of divine Spirit that says, “If ye be led of [Me], ye are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18) — not subject to the limitations and ultimatums of material law, human conditions and behaviors, disease, sin, or death.
- Church is divine Truth that elevates the race and gives human endeavors spiritual purpose and heavenly rewards.
- Church is omnipotent Life, freeing us from every suggestion of servitude to human, environmental, global, or physical forces or evolution.

A church this infinite could never exist within a physical structure. Rather, the physical structure is an expression of this eternal Church. The eternal Church has a structure of its own. Mrs. Eddy defined it as “... The structure of Truth and Love; whatever rests upon and proceeds from divine Principle” (SH 583:12).

The physical church where we go to worship is the representation of the concept of church we hold in thought. This concept has nothing to do with a physical building, and everything to do with what is in our hearts. We have within ourselves the ability to ensure its effectiveness to the extent that we imbibe and practice the spirit of Truth and Love. Paul said as much. He said, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16) — and not in some temple or church? Note also that he didn’t say ye are the “temples” of God. There is one church, the one spiritual idea of church, with its infinite expressions. Of this church, Mrs. Eddy said, “Built on the rock, our church will stand the storms of ages: though the material superstructure should crumble into dust, the fittest would survive, — the spiritual idea would live, a perpetual type of the divine Principle it reflects” (Mis. 140:28).

This was exemplified beautifully in the experience of a dear friend. She was traveling in Peru with a group of friends. Seeing as how it was a Sunday, she and her friends decided to attend a Christian Science service at a simple little church in Lima. I say simple...there were fewer than 10 members in attendance that morning. She and her friends knew enough Spanish to navigate their way around the country, but not nearly enough to understand everything that was spoken at the service that morning. But the words didn’t matter. The inspiration they felt transcended words. The love that permeated the service; the joy that sprang so naturally from their practice; the healing that fueled their devotion; the love that inspired them to continue holding their services despite a scarcity of attendees at times — this is what attracted those visitors that day. It was one of the most memorable and inspiring services my friend remembers ever attending.

Mrs. Eddy tells us, “The silent prayers of our churches, resounding through the dim corridors of time, go forth in waves of sound, a diapason of heart-beats, vibrating from one

pulpit to another and from one heart to another, till truth and love, commingling in one righteous prayer, shall encircle and cement the human race" (First Church and Miscellany, p. 189:8). The love emanating from that church rippled throughout the world that day, no doubt with healing effect.

This is the true church. Not bricks and mortar. Not members dutifully attending and writing checks every week. It is the church Mrs. Eddy envisioned:

"The Church is that institution, which affords proof of its utility and is found elevating the race, rousing the dormant understanding from material beliefs to the apprehension of spiritual ideas and the demonstration of divine Science, thereby casting out devils, or error, and healing the sick" (SH 583:14).

Julia Johnston, an early worker in the Christian Science movement, once said,

"The Master did not build the foundation of the whole Christian Church, for all time, with coins saved from his labor at the carpenter's bench, but with ideas gathered from communion with the divine Mind. Not the numbers of men who followed him, but the legions of angels (inspired thoughts) that accompanied him, were the cause of his progressive steps. He both reasoned and acted from the basis of his relationship with the things of heaven, not with the conditions of Galilee!!"

A physical church, no matter how beautiful or simple the structure, doesn't have the power to persuade or dissuade people to visit it. A church manifests the collective thoughts of its members. Knowing and expressing the spiritual concept of church is the only true attraction — and it does attract, just like the early gatherings where the leaders of the church were living testaments to the healing power of the Christ .

Because church is within us, within consciousness, its integrity is preserved when we preserve the integrity of our consciousness — or, in simple terms, when we watch what we think. When our vision, our understanding, of church is impaired, the manifestation will be a church impaired.

When we understand this, we will realize that:

- We are not discouraged because of declining interest in our church within our communities. Our church is of declining interest to our communities because we are discouraged.
- Our churches are not dying because our services are uninspiring. Our services are uninspiring when our churches are dying in our hearts.
- Our Sunday Schools are not empty because young people are choosing alternative solutions to life's problems. Young people are choosing alternative solutions to life's problems because our Sunday Schools are empty of the solutions that meet their needs — the examples from people who are living testaments to Christ.

This is pretty straight talk, but there is good news in all of this. Knowing, as Mrs. Eddy says, that we see what we believe dispels the illusion that we're at the mercy of global trends. The real church never has been at the mercy of world trends. World trends are at the mercy of our thinking and practice. When our thought is right, our lights so shine that nothing that can keep receptive hearts from finding and rejoicing in this church.

Look at early Christianity. It took root and blossomed at what could arguably be called the worst possible time. Israel was under Roman occupation, dissent was met with crucifixions, powerful religious factions were at war with each other, huge economic disparities existed between the social classes, and perennial issues like race and marginalization were constant points of division. Does this sound remotely familiar? Yes, and yet in the midst of all this, Jesus started a movement that changed the world.

Instead of thinking that our church exists in an unwelcoming material universe, let's change our view of the universe! Sound crazy? Recall that God said,

"...behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. ...They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; ... (Isa. 65:17, 18, 23).

The "new heavens and new earth" is the atmosphere of Spirit where no endeavor is ever in vain or suffers decline — where "the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind." Isaiah said, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ... like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands" (65: 21,22).

This is the church that is right here before us on our walk to Emmaus today. It is God manifesting Himself in tangible ways in our lives. This is an eternal phenomenon, not subject to decline, inactivity, or dissolution. This church is perpetually active and constantly expanding. The eternal nature of God is the reason that this church will never expire.

None of this is to suggest that we abandon the local churches we belong to, or ignore the present needs of the world. Just the opposite. An expanded understanding of the idea of church will manifest itself in the appropriate structure of our churches, making them more practical, more urgently needed, and more embracing of the world in their expanding arms of love and healing.

There is no question that we all must do more and better healing. The healing of sickness, disease, and sin has always been the primary confirmation that the Christ is here and being demonstrated. This has always been the attraction of our church. Like the disciples walking to Emmaus, whose newfound acknowledgment of the presence of the Christ obliterated their futile view of a dying ministry and resulted in spreading the good news of Christianity throughout the world, a revitalized understanding of church by us will result in

more healing, and in a more uplifting and inspired expression of church in our communities.

Tradition and routine have no place in this calculus. Instead, our churches must manifest the inspiration and spontaneity of thought that is indicative of the alive-ness of Spirit. This uplifted sense of church minimizes the importance of physical attributes and glorifies its real purpose to afford proof of its utility, elevate the race, rouse the dormant understanding, and demonstrate divine Science.

This is the standard by which all improvements and changes to our churches should be measured — Will it afford more proof of its utility? Will it help elevate the race and rouse the dormant understanding to a higher demonstration of casting out error and healing the sick? If it doesn't, can we really say we are improving our church?

Dispelling the mist

Now, there's one other thing that is very important. If we are going to see the real church, then we must dispel the mental mist that impedes our ability to see it clearly. What is this mist?

It is anything that compromises the integrity of our thinking. Paul called it "the carnal mind." Christian Science calls it animal magnetism. The underlying error behind every claim of decline or failure is the mesmerism that makes us accept, consciously or unconsciously, the basic belief that matter or materiality governs and is the foundation of life, and God is not.

Now, I'm pretty sure none of you are consciously accepting the suggestion that matter is the foundation of everything and that God is simply a bystander. It's the unconscious acceptance that we need to be alert to — hypnotic suggestions that come to us without our consent when we are distracted or not alert to their modes of operation.

We take specific measures to secure our homes from intruders at night, and we need to be just as diligent with our thinking. When we let down our guard, intrusive suggestions — thoughts that are foreign to us, or the worldly or malevolent thoughts of others — can enter our consciousness and take up residence without our knowledge. We treat these like our own thoughts. We take ownership of them and think it is we who are really thinking them, when in fact we are ignorantly acting on behalf of causes we would never, naturally side with. This is mesmerism, and we must be alert to it because its influence is always destructive.

These are the real enemies of church. It is what tried to convince the disciples that Jesus' ministry had come to end — even though they were walking in his very presence. Jesus spoke often about the permanence of God's kingdom, but also of the need to be wary of false prophets that could, "... deceive the very elect" (Matt. 24:24). These false prophets are at work today in seemingly innocuous ways, but with the same depraved goal — to undermine all the good the church is doing today.

Our Leader says, "At this date, poor jaded humanity needs to get her eyes open to a new style of imposition in the field of medicine and of religion, and to 'beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees,' the doctrines of men, even as Jesus admonished" (Mis. 366:16–20). Thoughts of despair and decline, longing for better days, or discouragement that church has lost its relevance in a modern world, are all examples of doctrines that make it hard for us to see the real church.

If we're not actively rejecting the false, negative suggestions about the church's decline, we're accepting them. Even blandly ignoring them is accepting them at one level. When we allow such thoughts to displace our understanding of the universal church, this compromise in our thinking will make it impossible to see the real church. We might find ourselves despairingly walking to Emmaus, thinking that all those things we learned from Jesus and his disciples no longer apply to us today.

Mrs. Eddy once counseled a student about the need to defend ourselves from invasive and destructive thoughts. She wrote, "Treat yourselves that you cannot be made to believe a lie, that you cannot be mesmerized nor made to think the reverse of what is correct about anything or anybody" (Mary Baker Eddy: Christian Healer, p. 247, by Yvonne Cachê von Fettes and Robert Townsend Warneck). To another student she wrote, "Study daily Science and Health, put the world, the flesh, and evil under your feet. Treat yourself against the influence of mortal mind. Watch that you are not led away from the true statement and the spirit of Christian Science. We all must do this, hourly. What I say unto you, I say to all, watch" (ibid, p. 247-248).

Here are some of the subtle suggestions I'm talking about. These come to us and just quietly take up residence in our thinking until we begin to believe they're our thoughts. They never are, but if we don't recognize and reject them, we give them voice, and this is what they sound like:

- "Church has lost its inspiration for me and seems so irrelevant today."
- "I don't need church. I can get inspiration by studying and praying by myself when and where it is convenient for me."
- "I'm too busy / too tired / having too much fun... to go to church today." Never underestimate the good that may come from your love for church and what it is doing, and the fellowship you have with others and they have with you.
- "I think I'll attend the online service. It's as good as attending in person." — I love that the Bible says — "God...hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4,6). God does have a sense of humor, doesn't He?
- "I've paid my dues. I've given so much time to church over the years that I'm not going to volunteer for committee work anymore or let my name stand for elections"

- “I don’t give testimonies at church because I don’t have anything worth sharing.”
- “The future of our church is in our youth, so I’m only supporting youth activities and not our church now.”
- “I don’t need to subscribe to, or read, the periodicals Mrs. Eddy provided for members of her church.” I get enough inspiration elsewhere.
- “My church gives public lectures and that suffices for my outreach to my community.”
- “I attend services and donate to my church. I don’t need to do anything else.”
- “I love catching up with friends at church, but I’m not so interested in the studying and healing part of it.”

The devil sure is creative, isn’t he? Have you ever heard him saying these things to you?

There is nothing original in these claims. These aren’t your thoughts! These are nothing more than subtle suggestions of animal magnetism that, unconsciously, are creeping into the thinking and behavior of many good, church-loving people. They crowd out thoughts of love for church and its activity, love of learning, love of practicing, love of healing, love of loving—and are subtly tempting people into believing that not only is the church declining, but their ability to be practicing, healing Christian Scientists or Christians is also declining.

Seeking the lost sheep

So how are we to talk to one who has already left the church or believes it is no longer relevant to them? Or how do we talk to one who feels they’ve had a bad experience at church and don’t want to come back?

Our first line of response should always be to actively and regularly refute these suggestions in our prayers before we meet or talk to these dear ones. We can know that the attraction of worldly interests is a poor substitute for the joys of Soul, and no one can be deprived of the fullness of God’s good. “There is but one real attraction, that of Spirit,” as we read in Science and Health (SH 102:9). The attraction of Spirit eclipses any other interests or activities.

Beyond this, wasn’t Jesus modeling the best response to someone who is wandering down their own road to Emmaus, or who might already be there? What did he do?

- First, he listened to these disciples. He didn’t come to them with guns blazing. He had enough compassion to listen to what they were thinking, what they had to say. No doubt he was praying as they spoke.

- Second, he reasoned with them. How? By expounding the Scriptures to them. There was no personal opinion or emotion in this line of reasoning, just the irrefutable and irresistible power of the Scriptures and the corresponding power of spiritual logic.
- Third, he broke bread with them — he shared Truth while engaging in a symbolic gesture of love and fellowship. He was among them as one of them, and he patiently reasoned with them.
- Fourth, and most importantly, he lived the principles he preached. He exemplified the best of what church does for mankind. He just rose from the sepulcher! What better way is there to impress upon another the blessings church offers than to be living examples of what those blessings are?

We can reach out to those who have left the church and offer to commune with them in a spirit of love, unity, and fellowship. But most importantly, our lives should illustrate the rewards that flow from a virtuous, church-impelled life. This is the church. This is how we compel and persuade the lost sheep to return to the fold. When the fire is burning within, it can't help but be seen without. "Yea...I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

I remember the first church I ever joined. I was eighteen and a freshman in college. I had just rediscovered Christian Science and I was on fire about it.

I had always believed there was a god, had even been brought up in a Christian Science Sunday school. But I couldn't get my head around some of the principles of Christian Science — like the concept that matter and sickness are not real because God couldn't, and didn't, make them. So I left Christian Science as a teenager and went on my own search.

I soon found it was even harder to get my head around some of the mainstream principles I was introduced to. I questioned how an infinite God could possibly dwell in the finite body of Jesus; how, in a universe filled by an infinite God who is good and who made all things, there could even be room for a devil, or Satan; how a God who is love could send sickness, sorrow, and death to mankind. That was just the tip of the iceberg!

When I found myself falling back on my fledgling understanding of Christian Science to sort through these questions, I found that all my questions were actually answered. Then I couldn't soak it up fast enough. Thankfully, there was a Christian Science church within walking distance of my college dormitory that was ready to receive someone with my hunger for spiritual understanding.

The first Sunday I could, I walked to that church, and upon arriving there, you would have thought I was the returning Prodigal Son. The members were so grateful to see me that they practically descended on me. I was ushered into a Sunday school class that was full and lively. The teacher was also on fire, and was an experienced Christian Science practitioner. He encouraged us to ask all the hard questions, and we did. I even went to see him outside of class during the week.

I later learned that this membership had been meeting in a local elementary school gymnasium for the previous two years while they saved up money to build their own church. They had been cherishing the idea of church all that time. By the time they finally had an edifice, they couldn't wait to share it with their community. They were practically bubbling over with joy. So when I arrived, it was as if they had been waiting just for me. Visitors were the most important thing that happened to them every week. It was truly a thrill to be there, and an answer to my prayers. The real church was alive in the hearts of those members, and so it was felt by all those who came to that dear church.

Does this describe your church? Has the flame died out?

Did Christ die on the cross? The disciples thought so, but Jesus taught them two invaluable lessons: first, that Jesus was not the Christ, but the one who revealed it to mankind; and second, that Christ is an idea that cannot die. It is immortal, eternal.

Your church — with its magnificent or simple building, its physical location, the number of members who attend it, the color of its lobby, — is not the real church any more than the man on the cross was the Christ. The real church is the structure of Truth and Love. It can never be crucified or decline. When your concept of church becomes impressed with the physical structure and loses the spiritual concept, its real purpose, you may think that church is on the wane. But the Christ is present to lift this concept to a higher, more inspired view where the Church Triumphant reigns forever.

If the true concept of church is understood, lived, and shared by its members, that will be the beacon that attracts tired humanity to its chambers of love. Its physical form and location won't make a bit of difference. Mrs. Eddy wrote, "To the students whom [Jesus] had chosen, his immortal teaching was the bread of Life. When he was with them, a fishing-boat became a sanctuary, and the solitude was peopled with holy messages from the All-Father. The grove became his class-room, and nature's haunts were the Messiah's university" (Retrospection and Introspection, p. 91).

Even if only one person lives and practices the right sense of church and shares their love openly and unselfishly, that church will experience what Jesus described when he said, "... I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). Imagine if we all did this together!

Julia Johnston, in a dedicatory address in New York City, said: "...this period of sacred adventure demands of every member a willingness to advance beyond the human sense of outlining, and contrary to the dictates of personal sense. It requires progressing by divine understanding rather than by sight. It insists that each one loose the idea of Church from his own finite sense of what it could be, or ought to be, to let it be expanded and manifested by divine wisdom. This view projects the impression that it was not so much gold that is taken from the earth, nor minted silver, nor coins earned by toil that really built our church, as it was the wealth of spiritual intuition, the treasure of unselfed love, the gift of obedience to divine will."

Isn't this the church we want? It has nothing to do with physical structure, tradition, or routine and everything to do with the unction of divine Love that permeates the hearts of its members. When we cherish this church in our hearts, this elevated understanding of the real church will enable us to see, and lead us to build, more inspired expressions of church in our own communities. It may or may not look like the church of yesteryear. But one thing's for sure — it will be a church of:

- doers, not bystanders
- givers, not takers
- healers, not talkers
- welcomers, not observers
- joy, not heaviness
- simplicity, not complication
- spontaneity, not routine
- warmth, not coldness
- inspiration, not repetition
- a church alive, not a church on the wane

God isn't waiting for us to build His church. His church is built — on the rock. Our job is to pray that the structure of this church be revealed in us in its holy grandeur. As we grow into this spiritual concept of church, we will find that...

- We will no longer go to church because we want to be inspired, but because we're inspired we will want to go to church.
- We will no longer think that our church is prosperous when it has visitors. It will have visitors because it is prosperous.
- We will no longer think that our church treasury is full when people are giving, but people will give because our real treasury, our well of inspiration, is already full.
- We will no longer think our churches need more appealing Reading Rooms and lectures to heal our communities, but because we are healing our communities we will need more Reading Rooms and lectures.
- We will no longer think that our Sunday Schools need more young people to support our Movement, but that because our Movement is supported by us we will see more young people.

Prophecy didn't end with the resurrection of Christ Jesus. Those prophecies continue today — and will for eternity. "The promises will be fulfilled," we read in Science and Health (p. 55).

So the question is not if the church will survive and thrive, but rather when will we awake to see this? When will we see the church that Peter saw? We don't have to wait for what's already here. As the writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe..." (Heb. 12:28, ESV).

We have our work cut out for us. Our Leader says,

“Millions of unprejudiced minds — simple seekers for Truth, weary wanderers, athirst in the desert — are waiting and watching for rest and drink. Give them a cup of cold water in Christ’s name, and never fear the consequences. What if the old dragon should send forth a new flood to drown the Christ-idea? He can neither drown your voice with its roar, nor again sink the world into the deep waters of chaos and old night. In this age the earth will help the woman; the spiritual idea will be understood. Those ready for the blessing you impart will give thanks. The waters will be pacified, and Christ will command the wave” (SH 570:14).

In an interview with Mrs. Eddy in the Herald magazine, the writer quoted her as saying:

“The continuity of The Church of Christ, Scientist,” she said, in her clear voice, “is assured. It is growing wonderfully. It will embrace all the churches, one by one, because in it alone is the simplicity of the oneness of God; the oneness of Christ and the perfecting of man stated scientifically.” (My. 342:19–32).

The continuity of our church is assured. The promises will be fulfilled. And the time to experience it is now. Let’s join together on this glorious walk!