

Due to copyright restrictions,  
this image is only available in  
the print version of  
*Christian Reflection.*

**Lelio Orsi imagines how Christ teaches his disciples,  
then and now, on the path they travel together.**

# Joined by Christ on the Path

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

**G**ospel travel narratives highlight theological points, not geographical details. But artists must depict the visual particulars of roads, wells, farms, villages, and characters in a story. The two disciples' walking the short road from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) is a case in point.

In the Lukan narrative, the disciples are talking about the events of Jesus' passion when the "unrecognized" Jesus joins them and asks what they are discussing. Presuming he is the "only stranger outside Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days" (Luke 24:18), they take the opportunity to inform him. But the disciples, in fact, do not understand what has happened: they are unsure whether Jesus was "the one to redeem Israel" (24:21), why his tomb is empty, and how he can be alive as the angels told the women at the tomb. Jesus replies, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (24:25-26). As Jesus walks with them, he explains the scriptures about himself, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" (24:27).

How can an artist portray men walking on a road with details to direct viewers to this specific narrative? Lelio Orsi, from Reggio Emilia, Italy, depicts three men in pilgrim's clothing, pushed to the foreground as is typical in Mannerist compositions. Nothing about Christ, the figure who gestures with his left hand as if in conversation, is exceptional. This is an established visual tradition by the sixteenth century. The figure on the left wrings his hands in agitation as he listens; both disciples appear to be despondent because they cannot reconcile their hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel with their fear that he is now dead.<sup>1</sup> The disciples' swords are prominently displayed on their belts. A goldfinch, symbolic of Christ's passion, can be seen in the foreground.<sup>2</sup>

We too imagine traveling with Christ – perhaps in a visual image that guides our thoughts and actions – as artists have done in paint for centuries.

## NOTES

1 J. Bradley Chance, "The Journey to Emmaus: Insights on Scripture from Mystical Understandings of Attachment and Detachment," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 38:4 (Winter 2011), 363-381, here citing 365.

2 Lelio Orsi, *The Walk to Emmaus*, The National Gallery, London, Collection Record, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/lelio-orsi-the-walk-to-emmaus](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/lelio-orsi-the-walk-to-emmaus) (accessed June 28, 2016).