

## “And They Recognized Him”

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 • Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19 • 1 Peter 1:17-23 • Luke 24:13-35

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I had a brief debate with myself this week about where I should focus this sermon. My first inclination was to preach on something *other* than the road to Emmaus story in Luke’s Gospel, as I have preached on that story at least a couple times before, and there are several good options this week. But in the end I circled back around to the Emmaus story. I know this is probably familiar territory for many of you. I also know we are blessed to have quite a number of people here now who weren’t here the last time I preached on this, and I think this is one of those stories that’s pretty foundational. This is one people really need to know. It’s a simple story. And it’s so profound.

The story takes place on Easter day. It’s no longer early in the morning; the women have come and gone from the tomb. It’s probably late morning or early afternoon when we pick up this story. “Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.” Two disciples of Jesus are walking along a road to a village called Emmaus. We are aware of several different villages that were called Emmaus. The name “Emmaus” literally means “Hot Springs,” so anyplace that was the site of hot springs could, quite understandably, be called “Emmaus.” One “Emmaus” was the site of a battle that took place a couple hundred years before Christ’s death and resurrection (you can read about that battle in the book of 1 Maccabees, in the Apocrypha). Another “Emmaus” was situated near Tiberias, not far from the Sea of Galilee. The Emmaus in this story was much closer to Jerusalem, only about seven miles away. We don’t know precisely where it was, but that doesn’t really matter. What *happened* in Emmaus is far more important than where it was. Indeed, what happened in Emmaus was so significant that numerous other towns and villages, at least four colleges, and various ministries have all been given the name “Emmaus,” because of this story. What happened in Emmaus that gave rise to all of that? Well, let’s keep reading.

“Two of them were going to a village called Emmaus ... and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.” One of these two disciples, we learn a few verses later, was named Cleopas. There is no mention of Cleopas anywhere else in the Bible. We have no idea what had led this man to become a follower of Jesus. Had Jesus healed him? Had he been inspired by Jesus’s teachings? Had he witnessed a miracle? Some people think this is the same person as Clopas, who is mentioned in John’s Gospel. Names were not always spelled the same way, and if you just drop the “e” from Cleopas, you get “Clopas.” John wrote: “Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” If these two men are the same person, then this man’s wife was one of a handful of Jesus’s followers who actually witnessed his death.

Luke never gives us the name of the other disciple. Maybe that’s intentional. Maybe that’s an invitation for us to see *ourselves* in that person. Maybe *we’re* walking on the road to Emmaus.

These two disciples are talking as they walk. What are they discussing? All the momentous things that have just happened. Cleopas describes it like this: “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” You can feel the heartache in his voice. It’s only been about 48 hours since Jesus was killed. But, just that morning, new rumors had started flying. In Cleopas’s words: “some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.” This is all incredibly perplexing. Their redeemer *died*, a horrible death, in a public and very bloody execution. Now some people are saying the redeemer has come back to life. It sounds like Cleopas would like to believe that himself, but he wasn’t there, he hasn’t seen the body. How can you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ if you haven’t *seen* him?

Well, this is the problem many people face today, isn’t it? The notion that Jesus could come back to life after being dead is more than many people can swallow. Many rational minds stumble. Some think it’s a hoax; others think maybe it’s just a metaphor. It just sounds too good to be true.

So Cleopas and his friend are walking along, trying to make sense of all this. I suspect that many of us can relate. It’s hard to make sense of the Gospel story. It’s hard to make sense of the Bible. There are pieces that are very difficult to understand, even for the biblical scholars and translators. They know when they don’t know something, when some part of the scriptures doesn’t quite make sense, when they’re having to make their best educated guess, and they wish they knew more. We all have questions; *I* have questions; there are a lot of things I wish I understood, that I simply don’t.

It is at this point that someone else comes along and joins their journey. Luke tells us straight up who it is: “Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Jesus comes to them in the midst of their sadness and confusion. That is one of the things that Jesus is *really good* at: meeting us *right where we are*. He meets us in the hard realities of our life.

Many artists through the centuries have captured this moment: Cleopas and his friend talking with Jesus, not realizing it *is* Jesus. Here are a few: (1) Altobello Melone, an Italian Renaissance painter, early 1500’s; (2) Giovanni and Francesco Cagnola, also Italian, around that same time; (3) Lelio Orsi, another Italian, late 1500’s; (4) Joseph von Führich, an Austrian, 1837; and (5) Robert Zünd, a Swiss painter, 1877. I find it interesting how the same story can give rise to such varied interpretations.

Jesus asks the two travelers what they are talking about. Cleopas is surprised at how much their new companion seems not to know: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” So Cleopas starts summarizing all the recent events. When he gets to Easter morning, and to the rumors that Jesus is alive – rumors that Cleopas does not seem to believe yet – Jesus sighs: “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?” It’s the *divine plan* that I talked about last week, the one that’s woven throughout the Jewish scriptures. But it’s not obvious; it needs to be explained; so, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” Jesus “interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” Somebody has to interpret the scriptures. There’s no getting around that. But that alone isn’t enough.

Towards evening, the travelers arrive at Emmaus. Jesus “walked ahead as if he were going on.” Cleopas and his friend “urged him strongly” to stay with them. Are they inviting him in just to be

hospitable? Or do they want to continue the conversation? They practically *beg* him! And he stays.

Here comes the climax. Don't miss this. "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." What's Jesus doing? He's celebrating *communion* with them. The Last Supper was three nights earlier. That's when he had instituted this meal. He had said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Now, three days later, Jesus is once again breaking and sharing bread. It's not his house – but he is most definitely the host. This is the first instance of communion, *after* the resurrection. And what happened? "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Do those words sound familiar? They should. I say those words every time we celebrate communion.

Artists have captured this moment too: (1) Giovanni and Francesco Cagnola again, early 1500s; (2) Jacopo Pontormo, Italian, 1525; (3) Titian, another Italian, 1535; (4) Vincenzo Catena, Italian again, 16th century; (5) Caravaggio, also Italian, 1601; (6) Caravaggio again, 1606; (7) Diego Velázquez, Spanish, 1620; (8) Abraham Bloemaert, Dutch, 1622; (9) Rembrandt, the famous Dutch painter, 1648; and (10) Laurent de La Hyre, French, 1656. And I'm sure that there are many more.

I said a couple minutes ago that "somebody has to interpret the scriptures.... But that alone isn't enough." What we have here in this story is a clear indication that for someone to come to faith, talking about scripture is important, but it is not the determining factor. The determining factor is what we call the "inward illumination of the Holy Spirit." It's that "aha!" moment when you see something you've never seen before, even if it's been right in front of you the whole time. These two travelers had spent a good chunk of their day with Jesus. And they had *no* idea. It wasn't until they were sharing this sacred meal together that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Folks like me can preach and teach till we're blue in the face, and I fully believe that's important work, or I wouldn't invest so much time and energy into it. But the thing that makes the critical difference in people's lives isn't the preaching, it isn't the teaching – it's the work of the Holy Spirit. *God* brings people to faith. I can't do that. I can do my best to try to help people connect the dots – to give people a greater understanding of the nuances of all this, and the meaning, and how it all fits together – but I myself, on my own, cannot bring *anybody* to faith. Only *God* can do that. And that's why we pray, every week, for the illumination of the Holy Spirit, *before* we start reading scripture. We're praying that God – the Holy Spirit – would *actively work*, here in our midst, to bring people to faith.

So Cleopas and his companion come to faith. What happened next? Jesus just *disappears*. Luke says "he vanished from their sight." They look at each other in amazement. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Whatever they were planning on doing in Emmaus is quickly forgotten. They get up from the table, that very hour, and head back to Jerusalem, in haste. "They found the eleven and their companions gathered together." The apostles are talking about how Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter. Well, Cleopas and his friend have some news of their own they need to share. "They told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

Where has Jesus gone? Luke doesn't say. My hunch is that he went to open some *more* eyes.

And what about us? Jesus only stuck around on earth for 40 days. Then he went back to heaven. None of us have seen Jesus in the flesh. But maybe we don't have to. Maybe, just maybe – actually, I think it's a lot more than just "maybe!" – we see Jesus through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, at different times and in different places, and *our eyes are opened, and we recognize him....*

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