

On the road to Emmaus

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-25

Text: Luke 24:13-15

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ...

Introduction

The Easter stories, as theologian N.T. Wright noted, are full of people getting the wrong end of the stick. Mary thinks Jesus' body has been stolen. Peter sees the linen wrappings and can't work out what it's all about. The disciples didn't understand the Scriptures. The angels question Mary, and she still doesn't know what's going on. Then she thinks Jesus is the gardener. Then, it seems, she reaches out to cling to him, and he tells her she mustn't. You could hardly get more misunderstandings into a couple of paragraphs if you tried.

At one level the continued puzzlement of the disciples is a mark of the story's authenticity. If someone had been making it all up a generation later, as many have suggested, they would hardly have had such a muddle going on. More particularly, nobody would have made up the remarkable detail of the cloth around Jesus' head, folded up in a place by itself, or the even more extraordinary fact that Jesus is not immediately recognized—by Mary outside the tomb, in the evening on the road to Emmaus, or when cooking breakfast by the shore. The first Christians weren't prepared for what actually happened. Nobody could have been. As one leading agnostic scholar has put it, it looks as though they were struggling to describe something for which they didn't have adequate language.

1. Precisely. When you read the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples—like this one on the road to Emmaus—you do not find any detail about the event of Jesus rising from the dead. No details of what happened inside the tomb Easter morning are included. What you read are details about the aftermath; stone rolled away, grave cloth folded, tomb empty. You don't read accounts of philosophic or ungrounded speculation of what might have occurred. As they recount the story they aren't speculating about life and death issues, so to say.

Have you ever pondered what would have happened if Jesus had not been raised from the dead? It's not the case that those who had been "taken" with him would have continued to meet with each other and remember him. In the wake of his death they realized that in being "taken" with him they had been "taken in". The small band of disciples would not have struggled on as one more Messianic sect within Judaism; it wouldn't even have remained a sect. Peter had gone back fishing. The two men on the road to Emmaus were lamenting their childish gullibility. "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

What you read is people doing their best to describe what they are experiencing; namely the same Jesus who they saw crucified, dead, and buried was now standing there in front of them very much alive. You get the sense that these people are not trying to read into their experience something that will make sense of what is happening. Rather, you get the sense that what is happening is reading them and reading itself into their situation; the sense that what is happening is breaking in upon their world (and our world) in an unprecedented way and reshaping and pushing aside assumptions and rearranging intellectual furniture, so to speak. In short, the risen Jesus—the living, breathing, risen Jesus—is forging the reality of his living presence into their lives.

Faith, biblically speaking, is relationship. “Most believers tend to speak of the motivation for their belief in terms of a response to, or encounter with, a personal, transcendent reality resulting in a commitment to a life of prayer, worship, and obedience.” Jesus, now risen, forges the reality of his living presence over our lives. “And having arrived at faith, many believers then turn to consider how their faith makes sense of what they observe and experience—not because it will lead them to faith, but because they wish to confirm and explore the sense making capacity of their existing faith.” (Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason*)

2. Maybe you too have been on this road to Emmaus; the road of walking away from faith. Listen again to the despair in their voice, “But we had hoped that he (Jesus) was the one to redeem Israel.” Jesus had disappointed them. They had hoped he would lead the rebellion and send the Romans packing. It hadn’t worked out as they expected. ‘How could we have been so gullible,’ they wonder. We may be familiar with this road. We had expected that Jesus would have healed us of some infirmity; saved our marriage; lifted the depression that spirals downward. But that didn’t happen. ‘What is the point in believing,’ we may wonder.

It is at this moment, the moment of walking away, that Jesus comes and walks along with them. They don’t recognize him at first. Luke tells us “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” We aren’t told what made recognition difficult. It may have been because of typical expectations; no one expects to see their dead friend on the path while walking away from the grave. I wonder if later they felt embarrassed that they walked with Jesus on this road telling him how disappointed they were with him, all the while thinking they were talking with a stranger. Our Lord is quite willing to come alongside and engage us in conversation about all our disappointments, including those with him.

Let me ask believers, did you recognize Jesus when he first walked along with you? Did you always know it was Jesus forging the reality of his living presence over your life? Yes, we can look back in hindsight, as these two disciples did, and see that he was walking with us long before we recognized that it was him. They acknowledged that their hearts were burning within as they talked with him even before they recognized him. Many of us also can point to similar things that we know, looking back, had to be the voice of the Savior warming our hearts with his love for us.

Does it ever surprise you the things these disciples knew and yet still walked away? Keep in mind that it is still Sunday; the first day of the week; the day the tomb was found empty. Listen again to what they said to Jesus about what they had been discussing as they walked along the

road. “But we had hoped that he (Jesus) was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, 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.”

The tomb was found empty, the body could not be located, some women had a vision of angels who said he was alive, and the boys had been to the tomb to confirm that it was empty. And they still walk away. I think this an indication of how despondent they were and that the farthest thing from their mind was any thought that they would see him alive again (not in this life). I remind you that all these indicators—empty tomb, no body, angel visitation—don’t prove that Jesus rose from the dead. “Him they did not see,” said these two dejected disciples (maybe a note of incredulity is in their voice, a little like saying, “it goes without saying, he was nowhere to be found”).

And are we any different? All these things are recorded in scripture, but does the fact of their recording cause you to believe? The witness that the tomb was empty is not in doubt and while it may be the occasion for someone to pause a moment—we still walk away. We have reflected on this point on other occasions; the point that no first century follower of Jesus came to believe that Jesus rose from the dead because the tomb was empty. It was only upon meeting the risen Jesus that they understood why the tomb was empty. The Apostles witness that it was the reality of meeting the risen Jesus, now alive, that explained everything they experienced.

We don’t interpret the resurrection of Jesus by the measures of our world; the resurrection of Jesus interprets us and our existence. The kingdom of God forges its way into our kingdoms and limited apprehension of reality. Or perhaps also to say the resurrection of Jesus interrupts us and all our descriptions and convictions about our experience of life

3. But Jesus does not want to leave them in this state of not knowing who it is that is walking and talking with them. God always wants us to know that it is God who comes alongside to speak with us. When they got close to Emmaus the two disciples insist that this unrecognized traveler accept their hospitality to stay with them since the daylight would soon be gone. Jesus accepts. Jesus always accepts. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

‘So he (Jesus) went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.’ The question is often probed on how they finally recognized that it was Jesus. They said he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. When they saw him take the bread in his hands, they knew they were witnessing something familiar, something they had seen before. Was it the way he held the bread, said the blessing, broke it into pieces or the way he served them? No one does these things like Jesus. I wonder (and this is my own speculation) that in addition to the familiar way he handled the bread, was this moment as he turned his hands towards them to serve them the bread that they saw the scars left by the crucifixion nails. This was how Thomas recognized Jesus.

We don't know. We are told that 'their eyes were opened.' Recognition occurred. They now know that it is Jesus. God does not leave us in the dark about his presence in our lives. Maybe Jesus has been in your house, so to speak, for some time and in hearing the Apostles' witness preached you now recognize who it is. Each believer's story has unique experiences. Some came hearing a preacher hold out Jesus in an evangelism crusade. Others found their way in the routines of worship and hearing the story over and over. Some found their way convinced by what they experience in life—things like beauty and love—that there must be more to existence than what our five senses detect. All believers share one thing in common—we come to recognize that it is Jesus. In whatever their journey entailed, looking back, they have come to know that it is the living Saviour forging the reality of his presence in our lives.

4. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. As you read the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances the fact that he vanishes from sight is never an occasion of disappointment or dismay for the disciples. We don't see these two sitting around the Emmaus dinner table wondering, 'where did he go?' They don't bemoan, "he has gone and left us again." Rather, they jump to their feet because they have great news to tell. Somehow, the fact that Jesus vanished is never experienced as Jesus abandoning them; they continue to know him to be present even though he vanished. This witness is for us and for all who come to believe on account of their witness; as Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The story reveals two indicators of Jesus' presence. The disciples said their hearts were burning as he talked with them along the way. What was Jesus talking about? "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" said Jesus. Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. The second place of revealing was in the breaking of the bread. This is why word (the scriptures read and preached) and sacrament are the staples of the church's worship; why we assert that Jesus is making himself known as we do these things in faith.

I notice too that their disappointment with Jesus somehow gets resolved for them in the reality of our Lord's kingdom. The reason they were on this road to Emmaus—Jesus had not ousted the Romans as they expected—is resolved for them in the victory over sin and death that has been won in Jesus. Something more glorious shines its light on the travails of this world. Justice will be done in the judgement our Lord renders in the kingdom of his light.

So also, for all those reasons that we may find ourselves on this road to Emmaus. In the Apostle John's vision, we have a glimpse of that future our Lord has secured for us where death and crying and pain are no more. Because Jesus is resurrection and life, he heals us of that disease which closes out our earthly existence; and in healing us of this he heals us of all those diseases that anticipate it. In that kingdom, where love will only give way to more love, broken relationships are restored, eclipsed in the wonder of the uninhibited love of that future.

While they were talking and discussing—while we are talking and discussing what is happening to us—Jesus himself came near and went with them.