

LUKE 24:13-35: JESUS APPEARS ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

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“No resurrection. No Christianity”.

So declared Michael Ramsay, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, and rightly so.

The resurrection is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Had there been no resurrection, there would have been no church – and we would all have had better things to do with our time today.

True, from a purely rational perspective belief in the resurrection of Jesus is absurd.

Dead people do not rise from the dead. Death is always final.

But, in the words of Lord Byron, there are times when *“truth is... stranger than fiction”*.

The resurrection of Jesus is one of those times. Jesus is risen from the dead!

Jesus appears to two

How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead?

On the one hand there is the evidence of the empty tomb – the body of Jesus was not to be found. On the other hand, there is the evidence of the resurrection appearances – Jesus appeared to Peter and then to the 12, he appeared to more than 500 people at one time, and he appeared to a couple on the road to Emmaus. Time and again critics have suggested that these resurrection appearances were a product of wishful thinking. But in each case, the possibility of Jesus being risen from the dead was the last thing to occur to Jesus’ disciples. The resurrection came as an enormous surprise to them – indeed, ‘surprised’ is not the word – they were over-awed that God should have acted in this way.

Tonight I want to look at the couple on the road to Emmaus.

Tom Wright, the present Bishop of Durham, has said (*Luke 292*): *“If the story of the prodigal son has a claim to be the finest story Jesus ever told, the tale of the two on the road to Emmaus must have an equal claim to be the finest scene Luke ever sketched”*

This story has always had a special appeal to me, because of a picture my father bought when I was a young teenager. It was a picture of Jesus walking down along an English country lane – or so it seemed, because the picture was dominated by large oak trees painted in exquisite detail. Along the lane walked two individuals in flowing Eastern robes. It was in fact a picture of the road to Emmaus painted by a Swiss artist.

Who were these two individuals?

Strangely Luke tells us only that one was named "**Cleopas**" (v18).

People have often assumed that Cleopas’ travelling companion was his wife - but such an assumption is no more than speculation – it could have been his sister, or indeed his brother!

Cleopas himself has sometimes been identified with "**Clopas**" whose wife Mary was according to John 19.25 present at the crucifixion.

According to Jewish tradition Cleopas was the brother of Joseph and therefore the uncle of Jesus; he was also said to be the father of Simeon, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church after AD 70. Frankly, we do not know.

Cleopas was not an unusual name: it was the contraction of the longer name "*Cleopater*", the male form of the female "*Cleopatra*".

The truth is that we do not know who this Cleopas was.

But that is no problem. Indeed, the fact that Luke records that Jesus appeared to these two apparently insignificant disciples is in itself a pointer to the historicity of the account.

Had the story been invented, then it would have been much more likely to have featured two well-known apostles.

All we know about this couple was that they were "**followers of Jesus**" (v13).

They didn't belong to the inner circle of the 12 – but they were friends of Jesus.

Luke tells us that these two "**were going to a village named Emmaus, about 11 kms from Jerusalem**" (v13): i.e. it was about 7 miles from Jerusalem.

Now this bit of information creates a problem. For the modern Emmaus ('Amwas: see 1 Macc 3.40,57; 4.3 etc. and is referred to by Josephus) is almost 20 miles north west of Jerusalem and is therefore much further away than suggested by Luke. The two disciples could scarcely have travelled that distance by foot and then returned the same day.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, mentions another village called Emmaus (today called Kuoniyeh), but this was some three and a half miles North West of Jerusalem. If this was the Emmaus of Luke 24, then we must assume that Luke intended to mean that this village was a seven mile round trip from Jerusalem!

Notice too that it was on "**that same day**" i.e. Easter Day, that the two were out for a walk (v13). We are not given any reason for their making this journey.

In the light of the discovery of the empty tomb and of the message of the angels, one might have assumed that all the disciples would have stayed together until the mystery of the 'disappearing body' had been solved.

However, if Emmaus was only three and a half miles away, these two may not have been intending to leave the other disciples for any extended period of time. Rather, they may just have been going to their lodgings.

Not surprisingly on their way they talked about "**all the things that had happened**" (v14).

I would have loved to have been listening in to their conversation.

They must have talked about the crucifixion which had taken place just two days before – what a dreadful way for their friend to die – why had God allowed this to happen? It must have all seemed so unfair, and so not right.

They presumably talked too about the report that morning by the women that the empty tomb was empty; perhaps too they were there when Peter returned confirming the report of the women.

What on earth was all this about? They must have been bewildered by all these events.

Yes, they had a lot to talk about.

As they talked & discussed, "**Jesus himself drew near and walked along with them**" (v15). Presumably Jesus overtook them from the rear - he would have appeared to them to have been another pilgrim, returning home from the celebration of Passover in Jerusalem (see v18).

Amazingly they did not recognise him.

Listen to Luke: "**they saw him, but somehow they did not recognise him**" (v16).

The question immediately arises: How was it that these two did not recognise Jesus?

Remember, these were friends of Jesus – they had followed him around.

What prevented them from recognising Jesus?

- The least acceptable suggestion is that the evening sun was so dazzling that they were unable to see him properly! This would not explain why they did not recognise Jesus when eventually they came into the house for a meal.
- Their failure to believe the report of the women (v11) did not help them. No doubt convinced in their own minds that dead people don't rise from the dead, they refused to take the evidence for the empty tomb seriously.
- There is also the fact that their minds, so full of their own loss and disappointment, would not have been able to focus easily on their new companion.

Yet, none of these very human factors truly accounts for their non-recognition.

Rather, as Luke appears to suggest, some supernatural force was at work.

They were actually 'prevented' from seeing it was Jesus.

- It is unlikely that this was Satan's doing - for if so, then Luke would surely have been more specific. For example in Lk 22.31 we hear Jesus saying to his disciples, "**Satan has received permission to test all of you**".
- Rather we have here another example of a 'divine passive'. God was the cause of their non-recognition. We find a similar use of the 'divine passive' in Lk 9.45 & 18.34. On both occasions Jesus had spoken about his death, and on both occasions Luke comments: "**But the disciples did not know what this meant. It had been hidden from them so that they could not understand it**".

As to why God should have kept them from recognising Jesus, we can only speculate.

Elsewhere in his Gospel Luke states that neither the Father nor the Son can be known except by divine revelation (10.21,22: see also Matt 16.17 & 1 Cor 2.6-16)

Maybe here we have an instance of the divine refusal to coerce faith.

Faith, the story seems to suggest, is best exercised by minds which have been prepared in advance by an understanding of the Scriptures (see vv25-27).

An attractive thought to those of us living after the cessation of the resurrection appearances is the suggestion that Luke is also wanting to show that we can know the presence of the risen Christ without being able physically to see him. It is above all in the opening of the Scriptures and in the breaking of bread that Jesus is known

"**They did not recognise him**". As far as they were concerned, Jesus was dead and buried.

And as a result, they were overcome with grief.

They were "**sad**" (v17), not because this stranger did not know about Jesus, but because their best friend had died. The stranger's ignorance, however, caused their depression to surface – and as a result they felt even worse.

The travellers' tale

"Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have been happening there in these last few days?" (v18).

Notice, the question assumes that the crucifixion of Jesus was the talk of Jerusalem that Passover time. Indeed, it is possible that the phrasing of the question reflects Luke's emphasis that the events concerning Jesus were well-known & available for public scrutiny (e.g. 4.14; also Acts 26.26). Unbeknown to Cleopas, there was great irony in his question.

It was not Jesus who did "not know", but rather Cleopas and his companion!

Cleopas sought to fill in the stranger about Jesus.

His description of Jesus as **"a prophet, powerful in everything he said and did"** (v19: see 4.24; 7.16; 9.19) would in any other context have been high praise.

But, as the resurrection so clearly showed, Jesus was far more than a prophet - he was **"the Messiah"** (v26); he was **"the Lord"** (v.34). Or as Peter later declared at Pentecost: **"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord & Christ"** (Acts 2.36).

But at that stage, Cleopas had yet to believe in the resurrection.

Jesus was just a prophet.

According to Cleopas **"the chief priests and rulers"** (v20) were to be held responsible for the death of Jesus (see 23.13). There is no explicit reference to Pilate and the Roman soldiers and to the part they played in the crucifixion.

This fits in with Luke's intention to show Theophilus that the Christian faith was not - and never had been - a threat to Rome (e.g. 23.4,14-15; Acts 26.30-32).

The disappointment of the two disciples comes to full expression: **"We had hoped that he would be the one who was going to set Israel free"** (v21: see also 1.68; 2.38; 21.28).

The 'freedom' which these two had in mind was first and foremost political.

They had looked for one who would free Israel from the Roman occupying power (see Acts 1.6).

Tom Wright notes that it must have taken a certain amount of courage for the two of them to reveal to a stranger that they had been Jesus' followers – after all, this unknown man could have been a spy! But perhaps they were past caring.

"We had hoped". Their hopes had been well and truly dashed by the events of Good Friday. Ironically, they failed to see that it was precisely "freedom" ("redemption") which Jesus had achieved on his cross.

To quote Tom Wright again: *"They, like everybody else in Israel, had been reading the Bible through the wrong end of the telescope. They had been seeing it as the long story of how God would redeem Israel **from** suffering, but it was instead the story of how God would redeem Israel **through** suffering..."*

Nor did they see the irony in their reference to **"the third day"** (v21), a phrase whose use in the Old Testament was perceived to be expressive of deliverance.

According to the Midrash on Gen 42.17: *"The Holy One, blessed be he, never leaves the righteous in distress more than three days"*.

They ignored too the fact that Jesus had not only anticipated his suffering and dying, but also his rising on "the third day" (9.22; 18.33; 20.12).

The disciples then go on to summarise the story of the women's discovery of the empty tomb as also of the confirmation of the women's story (vv22-24: see 24.1-9), and in doing so express their continuing scepticism: "**but they did not see him**" (v24).

The possibility of resurrection was the last thing to come to mind.

Jesus' response

Jesus took the disciples to task. "**How foolish you are, how slow you are to believe everything that the prophets said!**" (v25). Jesus' response is surprisingly forceful.

The word "**foolish**" (*anoetoi*) literally means "*without intelligence or understanding*"; colloquially we might say "*without a brain*". It is the same word with which Paul upbraided the Galatians (Gal 3.1,3) for their attempt to add to the work of Christ on the Cross by their own human effort.

In addition Jesus describes them as '**slow-witted**': they were slow to believe.

Jesus upbraids them in particular for failing to take the Scriptures seriously.

If only they had listened to the prophets, they would have believed the report of the women.

Precisely what prophetic passages are in mind is uncertain.

- Did Jesus point to Isaiah 53, for instance? For Isaiah 53 speaks not just of the suffering of God's servant, but also of the vindication of God's servant.
- Another important OT passage which deals with resurrection is Psalm 16: "**I have served you faithfully, and you will not abandon me to the world of dead. You will show me the path that leads to life**" (Ps 16.10,11).

We know that in the preaching of the early church Is 53 and Ps 16 were frequently quoted.

It may be, however, that the phrase "**the prophets**" (v25) as also "**Moses and the writing of all the prophets**" (v27) and "**all the Scriptures**" (v27) indicates that no particular passage is being referred to.

"**Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things & then enter his glory?**" (v26).

As Jesus had come toward the end of his life, he had spoken a good deal about suffering. On a number of occasions he had said that "**The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the people of this day**" (17.25; 24.7: 22.37; 24.44).

As Peter was later to make clear, the death of Jesus was no tragic accident - it was part of "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2.23 see also 4.28).

But this is the very first time that we find the expression that the "**Messiah**" must "**suffer**" (see 22.46: also Acts 3.18; 17.3; 26.23 20.36).

In pre-Christian Judaism there was no notion of a suffering Messiah: Isaiah 53, for instance, was not at that stage interpreted of the Messiah.

The idea of a suffering Messiah, let alone a crucified Messiah, was unknown. Indeed, it was a contradiction in terms. To speak of a suffering Messiah would have made as much sense as for us to talk about 'fried ice'.

Jesus then gave the disciples a lesson in 'hermeneutics': i.e. he "**explained**" (v27) or 'interpreted' (*diermeneusen*) the Scriptures. What an experience that must have been! Philip was later to do the same for the Ethiopian official (Acts 8.35).

Jesus makes himself known

With the end of their journey in sight, "**Jesus acted as if he were going further**" (v28). There is no reason to suppose that Jesus was playing games with the two disciples. Had they not invited him into their home, he would have gone on his way. It was in his character never to force himself upon anyone (see Rev 3.21).

In the ancient world hospitality to strangers counted as a sacred duty (see Hebs 13.2) Luke, however, describes the disciples as being unusually forceful in their invitation to Jesus to stay. "**They held him back saying, 'Stay with us'**" (v29: see Acts 16.15). In other contexts the Greek verb (*parabiazomai*) can actually indicate the use of force! Clearly there was something unusually attractive about their companion.

"The day is almost over and it is getting dark" (29).

This accords with the Jewish custom to have the main meal of the day in the late afternoon.

The guest becomes the host. Jesus "**took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them**" (v30).

In one respect these are the actions familiar at the beginning of any Jewish meal.

However, we are surely right to see here allusions to the Last Supper (see especially 22.19).

This may not be a celebration of the Lord's Supper, but it is difficult to believe that Luke did not want to point his readers to the fact that in the preaching of the Word and the eucharistic breaking of bread Jesus makes himself known (vv30,32,35).

"Then their eyes were opened" (v31). Another divine passive.

It was not the 'four-fold action' or the belated sight of the nail-marked hands which suddenly struck a chord. It was God who enabled them to see.

Jesus, however, "**disappeared from their sight**" (v31). Like Mary Magdalene (Jn 20.17) and the women at the tomb (Matt 28.9), the disciples are unable to hold onto Jesus.

As the disciples reflected on their experience, they said to one another: "**Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked with us....?**" (v32). Jesus engaged their minds (see also v45), but their hearts too were involved. Here we have a reminder that Christian faith is never just a cerebral experience.

A somewhat inexact parallel has often been drawn with John Wesley's experience on May 24th 1738: "*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before 9, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me*

that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death".

Not surprisingly they could not keep to themselves the news of their encounter with the risen Christ. In spite of the argument that they had used with Jesus about the day being almost over, they "**got up at once and went back to Jerusalem**" (v33). But before they could share their news, the others had news to share "**The Lord has risen indeed! He has appeared to Simon**" (v34). What a day that was!

Easter Encounter

The story of the Emmaus Road is not just a story of a one-off encounter of the risen Lord. Rather, we may see this as a story pointing to how the risen Lord Jesus continues to encounter people - even today..

In the first place, ***Jesus encounters us in the darkness of our lives.***

As the Emmaus pair trudged along the road, with "downcast" faces (v17) they must have been in the depths of depression. As far as they were concerned, they had been let down by God: "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (v21).

Yet in their 'darkness' Jesus "came up and walked along with them" (v15).

Although they did not initially recognise him, Jesus was there.

Jesus is there too when we walk through our particular 'darkness'.

The darkness may take the shape of some tragedy or misfortune which hits our lives. We may have experienced loss of one kind or another. We feel let down by God - let down by our faith and maybe let down by his church. As we walk along life's way, we feel crushed, desolate and alone. But the story of the Emmaus Road is that God never abandons those who are his.

We never walk alone. Jesus, if we will but see, walks alongside us.

Jesus also encounters us in the preaching of his Word.

Central to the experience of the Emmaus pair was the opening of the Scriptures (v27).

Indeed, with hindsight they realised that it was precisely in the exposition of the Scriptures that their hearts burned within them (v32).

The same can be our experience today. The reading of and the preaching from Scripture can be as much of a 'sacrament' as baptism or the Lord's Supper, in the sense that God takes the written and spoken Word and uses it to bless our innermost being.

Lastly, Jesus encounters us in the breaking of the Bread.

It was in the breaking of bread that the eyes of the Emmaus pair were opened (v30).

The Lord's Supper need not be just a memorial meal. It can also be the place where we experience the 'real presence' of the Lord. The remembering becomes a means of encountering. Communion is not just with one another, but with the Lord.