

Scripture Reading for Sunday April 28th 2019

Luke 24:13-35 (NIV)

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus." ²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

SERMON: “How Can We Encounter The Risen Jesus Today?”

It is been said that the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” is the best story Jesus ever told. If that is the case, the description of what happened on the road to Emmaus is the finest scene that Luke ever sketched. Luke is a literary master, and this kind of evocative narrative would have been appreciated by his contemporaries, both Jews and non-Jews.¹ This incident contains sadness, suspense, dashed hopes, irony, conversation, recognition, and ends with joyful response. But it is more than a description of a resurrection appearance, because in it we can discern Luke’s answer to a wider question his readership would have, including us, namely: “How can we encounter the risen Jesus today?” With that in mind, let’s explore the story briefly together. And as we do so, let us place ourselves within the narrative and listen to the Spirit speaking to us afresh, and recognize Jesus walking with us on *our* own journeys.

We are told that Cleopas was one of two walking to Emmaus, at least 7 miles from Jerusalem and obviously too far for a Jew to walk on a Sabbath, the previous day.² The setting of the story is in the context of a *journey*, which is typical of Luke, who places the entire mission of Jesus in the context of the journey that slowly moves towards Jerusalem.³ We are told that they were discussing the week’s events, from the celebrations of Palm Sunday through to the tragedy of Good Friday. They were confused, and wondering what to make of the rumours of angels from the women at the tomb earlier that very day.⁴

Jesus joins them on their journey, but – for some reason - they didn’t know it was him.⁵ After all, without any expectation of the resurrection, why *should* they think it *would be* Jesus? It was much more likely to be another Passover pilgrim returning home. In that sense, they already blind because of their own preconceived ideas of God and God’s actions in history. Or could it be that Jesus’ resurrection body was somehow transformed so that he wasn’t as recognizable as he once was? Or do their wounded, sad hearts make them unable to see the true identity of their fellow traveler? Luke does not tell us. Whatever the reason, they needed Jesus to open their eyes. And so do we!

As they were walking on, the two travelers explain to the stranger why they are so sad. They identify Jesus as mighty prophet⁶ and how, instead of being embraced as a messenger of God, the Jewish leaders - both religious and secular - handed him over to Roman “justice” to be condemned to death and crucified. They had “hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, the one to rescue Israel.”⁷ They had

¹ Both the Greco-Roman literature and the Old Testament contains stories of heroes, angels, or gods sometimes incognito and sometimes as fellow travelers. This is in the tradition of entertaining angels unawares (Heb 13:2; Gen 18).

² Luke 24:13-14. A Sabbath day’s journey was about 1 km. Incidentally, it’s possible the second person was Cleopas’ wife, Mary (John 19:25). It is also possible that it was his son, Simeon, later bishop of Jerusalem – after James the brother of Jesus.

³ And later, in Luke’s second volume, it is a journey that extends to the “ends of the earth” – meaning “Rome.”

⁴ Luke 24:1-8.

⁵ Luke 24:15-16; see Tob 5:4. They clearly had no expectation of resurrection, at least, not until the great “Day of the Lord.”

⁶ Luke 24:19 (see Luke 7 for a glimpse of Luke’s Jesus.) Of course, for Luke, the confession of “prophet” is correct, but not as high as the confession as “Messiah”, the “Lord,” “Son of Man,” or “Son of God.” The two travelers may simply have been cautious in front of a stranger (a spy?) and, consequently, the use of the title “prophet” is safer.

⁷ Luke 24:21. The language of “redeem” echoes the rescue from slavery in Egypt. See also Luke 1:68; 2:38.

expected Jesus to be one to liberate Israel once and for all from foreign domination, so that they could be free to serve God in peace and holiness. That is why the crucifixion was so devastating. It wasn't just that Jesus had been the bearer of their hopes and now that he was dead and gone. It was more pointed than that: if Jesus had been truly the one to save Israel, he *should* have been defeating their oppressors, *not* dying at their hands! And now three days have passed, so there is a sense of finality; that the events of the last week had all really happened and everything was over.

And yet perhaps not completely over! Luke relates their continuing explanation of events to Jesus: "Some women of our group have 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.*"⁸ Clearly their failure to see the risen Jesus created confusion regarding the meaning of the empty tomb. The irony is they assume the stranger knows *nothing* of the earth-shattering events of Christ's passion; however, Jesus is the *only* one who *does* know the meaning of all that has happened! Then we are told that: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets,⁹ Jesus interprets to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures."¹⁰ And so Luke has Jesus tell a story, a story within a story, as it were. And it is not unreasonable to assume that the essence of that narrative is included in Luke's gospel itself! The story is Israel's story, of which they would – of course – be very familiar. But this time, Jesus presents a new hermeneutic, a new principle of interpreting the historical narrative within the Old Testament. It is one that now pulls the various thematic strands together and focuses the plotline on Isaiah's *suffering* Messiah,¹¹ rather than God's Anointed One being like a warrior king.¹²

Going back to the question, "How can we encounter the risen Jesus today?" I suggest Jesus usually comes along side us today in disguise and when we least expect him. This is often through the timely wise words of another, or through a thought that seems too profound to be our own. Of course, we must carefully discern what we "hear" to ascertain if it could truly be of the Spirit – or if it is rubbish, or just our own fanciful thinking?¹³ This requires cautious and risky faith, and we take it a step at a time by *including* this "Jesus" in the conversation, whether that be in prayer, or reflection, or when talking with others. And "he" asks similar, sensitive, and probing questions: "What is going on? What is on your

⁸ Luke 24:22-24.

⁹ "Moses and all the prophets" means the Scriptures at the time, without entering into a debate about which books were canonical and which were not.

¹⁰ Luke 24:27. Luke 24:26 says, "Was it not *necessary* that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (NRSV). This notion of "necessity" is part of Luke's understanding of divine providence; see Luke 9:22, 43–45; 12:50; 13:32–33; 17:25; 18:31–34. This has become a part of traditional Christian theology (e.g., predestination); more recent scholarship finds nuanced, alternative ways to articulate this matter so that God the Father is not considered as "abusing" his Son. *All* members of the Trinity suffer, but in different ways.

¹¹ See, for example, Isa 52:13-53:12.

¹² Ironically, their hope was that Jesus would fulfill the Scriptures, but they saw his death – which was *indeed* its fulfillment – as only the frustration of their hope.

¹³ Much more can be said about this discernment *process*, including the use of scripture and the listening to the wisdom of others wise Christians who know us well. What is important is that this process takes place; this does *not* result in certainty, but cautious confidence to take the next step of faith.

mind?” And “he” listens to our response and engages with us right where we are at, with our doubts and fears. Like Cleopas and his friend, we too may be in despair. Our expectations, our hopes and dreams for the future may also have been dashed. Oddly, Luke even breaks his narrative at this point; instead of walking and talking, he says, “They stood still.”¹⁴ That pause in the story is one that also gives *us* time and space. There is no need to rush. Jesus *does* reveal himself clearly to them, but in his own time and way; then they walk on together and a conversation ensues. I believe Jesus works in this same surprising way today; more on this later.

Before they could begin to understand the events of the previous week, they had to be prepared. (And - of course - Luke has been similarly preparing his readers throughout his gospel.) Like everybody else in Israel, they had been reading the Old Testament through the wrong end of the telescope. They had been seeing it as a long story of how God would rescue the people *from* suffering; instead it was the story how God would redeem Israel *through* suffering. In particular, through the suffering love of Jesus, the Messiah. And today we would expand that suffering love to include the whole of the Trinity. And even when the world has done its absolute worst in crucifying God’s Chosen One, God – through the resurrection - ensures that Christ’s death is *not* the last word. So Jesus interprets for them all the things about himself throughout Scripture, from Genesis onwards; Jesus makes sense of things.¹⁵

All this speaks today to *our own expectations* as to how God can act. Are we, like the two travelers, *limiting God* by our own preconceived ideas concerning the nature of God and how God acts in history? If so, we may well not recognize God at work in the here and now. And when life is hard, when we are suffering, or when our expectations are not met, we might miss out on God’s presence and blessing. I believe we *will* encounter Jesus in surprising circumstances and in unexpected ways, but *only* if we are open to that possibility. This involves actively *including* Jesus in *our* stories, and that we do through prayer and sharing our stories with others. We need to recognize *our* place in *God’s* big story, not find a secluded place for God in *our* own, individualized story. This also entails listening to - and embracing - a radically different historical narrative, or worldview, to the various alternatives. A worldview that doesn’t focus on the pursuit of power, pleasure, and plenty, but on the meaning of the suffering love of God revealed in the events of the first Easter.

When Cleopas and his friend reached Emmaus, they invited him into their home, and hence into their lives. This is significant, as Jesus *never* forces himself upon others. He never coerces us.¹⁶ This meal at Emmaus is one of the most evocative of gospel scenes. Remember that these travelers were not of the inner circle of disciples, and so they did not witness the Last Supper in the Upper Room.¹⁷ Consequently, this was just an *ordinary* meal, probably one they had witnessed with Jesus before. Nevertheless, there are clearly echoes of the sacrament of Holy Communion in Luke’s skillful retelling. Jesus’ action of taking the bread, blessing and breaking it, signifies how the guest becomes the host. This also demonstrates

¹⁴ Luke 24:17b.

¹⁵ The Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, practiced by the early church, is here in Luke authorized by the risen Lord himself.

¹⁶ We are free to shut God out of our lives. While this breaks God’s heart, that is *our* conscious choice.

¹⁷ Although they may well have heard about all that went on in that Passover meal.

that every meal has the potential of being an event in which hospitality and table fellowship can become sacred occasions.¹⁸

At this climax two dramatic things happened: their eyes were opened and they recognized the stranger as the risen Jesus, and then he vanished from their sight.¹⁹ First, Jesus becomes known *by revelation initiated by God*; something profound happens. At the beginning of Luke's narrative, they were chastised as being *slow of heart* to believe all that the Scriptures had to say about the Messiah, at the end their *hearts burn within them*. And what happened to them is repeated in every encounter with the risen Jesus. In that moment of recognition, we change from ignorance to knowledge. Second, we must also acknowledge that God's presence is always elusive and is often dancing on the edge of our awareness and perception. We usually perceive God's profound presence in fleeting moments, which in themselves can be intense. Those moments can often be at the times of sacraments, but they are also to be found in unplanned ways on our journeys, only to be recognized for a moment and later seemingly lost. But in the act of remembrance²⁰ we recall that our hearts burned within us. Yes, it really did happen!

That recognition evokes a response; such revelations are not meant to be purely private, but shared with others. They could not keep their good news to themselves, but went straight back to Jerusalem that very night!²¹ When they got there, even before they could relate their story, the others disciples told them their own news. The *Lord has risen indeed* and has appeared to Peter. Others had shared similar, but different, experiences – but equally personal and real. The travelers to Emmaus discovered what we too can find today, namely that others have also encountered the risen Christ. That sharing of our experience of the alive Jesus transforms reality on what would otherwise be a lonely road, and it is from such experiences that new communities are formed.

Luke's detailed "Road to Emmaus" account emphasized how the Old Testament reveals God's involvement within history, culminating in a suffering Messiah. That context is where we too must begin. A good place start is to re-read a gospel, like Luke, and be open to God's Spirit speaking to us as fresh as profound truths comes out of the old pages. The careful study of the Bible is meant to bring together head and heart, understanding and excited application. But as with the two on the road to Emmaus, study *by itself* does not necessarily reveal the risen Christ, but it *does* create a vital foundation from which to recognize him when he does reveal himself, by his Spirit. It is good to do such study with others; so, why not come to the new Bible study called, "*On the Road Again: Journey with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem*"? Also be open *and* expectant to God speaking in disguise, through others and through our own life experiences, only later to have an "aha!" moment of recognition of God being present and to experience our hearts burning within us. The risen Jesus *wants* to walk with us on *our* journey, are we open for that and are we seeking him today? Let us pray.

¹⁸ This is a point Luke develops further in the book of Acts (see Acts 2:42-47).

¹⁹ There is a possible parallel with Adam and Eve eating of the fruit and having their eyes opened to the true reality!

²⁰ See also Luke 24:8.

²¹ And travelling at night was probably not recommended for reasons of safety!