

Emmaus: Now You See Him; Now You Don't

Eastertide

Luke 24:13-35 Text: Luke 24:31

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Spring Lake, Michigan
April 30, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

My name is Cleopas, not that it matters a great deal, because I didn't have anything particularly outstanding about me or any reason to be noticed in the Gospel narrative of the appearance story that was read a moment ago, but I was chosen as the example, I suppose, of that which was the experience of so many. I went to the Passover celebration; I was a part of that larger movement that was following Jesus and hoped that something would happen in Jerusalem, hoping that, somehow or other, we didn't know how, but somehow or other, God would move upon that city, would move through that man in whom we had come to trust, believe, and in whom our hopes were placed. I was there when he entered the city with acclamation. I was there when he made his bold statement in the Temple. I was proud of him, the courage, the unflinching courage with which he made his claim and pointed us to the eternal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I was there when they crucified my Lord.

The next day, Saturday, was the Jewish Sabbath, of course, but the day after any kind of a trauma becomes a rather formal affair. One just sort of goes through the motions. Thank God there was that ordinary Sabbath day to be observed, something one could just simply plod through without thinking, without feeling, just to get through.

But, Sunday dawned like your Monday, and I was beside myself. It's as though the whole world came crashing in around my ears. Oh, there were some rumors. Some women said they'd been to the tomb and that it was empty and they had seen the vision of angels, but no one gave it much credence. Around noon, I said to a friend of mine, "You know, I have to get out of here. I'm going to burst open if I don't get away from Jerusalem and all of the memories and all of the crushed hopes and dreams. I can't stand it; I have to get out of here. Let's go to Emmaus."

He said, "Fine. I'll join you."

Well, you know how it is; you think you can escape; you think you can get away, leave it all behind you, but you can't, and so we found ourselves on the road,

taking apart every aspect of the week, trying to figure out what went wrong, wondering where was God and questioning our own understanding. How could we have gotten so mixed up about who this was and what might have happened through him? It was strange as we – obviously, as deeply in depression as we were as we left the city limits – sensed a presence with us, and sure enough, a stranger came up alongside us and said, "What is this conversation you're having?" Well, I couldn't believe anybody didn't know what had just happened in Jerusalem. But, he said, "No, what things?"

And so, I told him, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man mighty with God, a prophet whom we hoped would set Israel free, they killed him. He's dead. And it's over. And frankly, we're just running away."

And then, you know, the strangest thing happened. The stranger began to give us a Bible lesson like I've never had in my life. Oh, all the things he mentioned were familiar; I knew them from a child, all those scripture passages to which he referred. But, the case he was making is that we had totally mis-read our own scriptures, that what had just happened, after all, was something that we might have known would happen inevitably if we had understood our own scriptures. He took us into the Torah of Moses and through the Psalms and the prophets, all very familiar to me, but I was hearing it again as for the first time. It was all very familiar to me, but I never understood it before; I never put it together before; I never had a clue before. I knew the Psalmist's cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" I knew the suffering servant's story of Isaiah 53, the Lamb led to the slaughter. I knew the one who without violence does not lift up his voice in the street, but who with gentleness will never break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. I knew all of that, but I never put it together. I guess, as a matter of fact, I was more turned on by, for example, the fiery prophet Elijah. My own expectation, I suppose, was shaped by Malachi who was looking for one to come to judge, to bring fire from heaven. And all of that other stuff in there, it's all there, but somehow or other I never identified it with Jesus. I guess I'd have to say I never recognized who he was at all. It was probably my own agenda I was projecting on to him, thinking about sitting on thrones and judging Israel and being in the top spot for the new regime. It was a Bible lesson like I'll never forget. In retrospect, my friend and I talking about it later realized that while it was going on, our hearts were burning, our hearts were palpitating. There was a blood rushing through our system; something amazing was happening to us.

We approached the village and the stranger was going to go on, but we encouraged him to stay with us and we came to the evening meal, and again, a rather strange thing happened - he who was our guest became our host. He took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to us, and we knew it was he. Our eyes were opened; we recognized him. It was Jesus. He was with us. He was alive! Just the moment we began to feel the excitement rise and the joy break over, he was gone. Vanished from our sight. Disappeared. No trace of him.

Well, you can imagine we couldn't put all that together, but one thing was certain - even though the day was far spent, we headed right back to Jerusalem and you know what we found there? Well, he'd also appeared to Simon and so there was already a party underway and they were celebrating and we said to one another, "The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed."

And then, there he was again! Strange.

Well, that's my story. But, you understand, the version of it that you have in the evangelist's Luke's Gospel is a version of my story some fifty years later, well-honed. If you read Luke or, for that matter, Matthew or Mark, you'd think it was all settled on Easter Sunday afternoon. Of course, that wasn't the way it was. It was my experience, but it was my experience condensed. It was my experience as example of the experience of that numberless crowd that had put their hopes on Jesus and found their dreams smashed and who eventually came, as I came, to experience him once again alive. Because what the evangelist wanted to do was, in concise a manner as possible, tell the good news, and so, it's all in there, but it's sort of squashed together, that disappointment, that disillusionment, that sadness of heart.

Oh, my God, it was awful and it didn't evaporate in a day or a week or a month or, frankly, for a year. We pretty much scattered after that traumatic crucifixion, back to Galilee, into the Judean countryside, sad of heart, with crushed hopes and broken dreams, wondering if there was any meaning to anything, wondering if one could believe anything anymore, wondering if one ever could put one's trust in someone or something, wondering if the noblest ideas and ideals of the human family would amount to anything, ideals of freedom and love and justice, whether grace and mercy, whether any of that would make any difference in the long run.

Of course, you don't have an experience as we had with Jesus, even through the trauma of the crucifixion, without continuing to reflect on it, to think about it, and that Bible lesson that he gave us, of course, points to the fact that that is exactly what we did. We went back to our scriptures and we scoured them for some clue as to what in the world we had just experienced, and we did find the Psalm, "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?" we did find the Lamb led to the slaughter, we did find all of those pointers that represent the graciousness of God in humility. As we did, we began to share with one another, and as we came together, we told Jesus stories and as we told Jesus stories and as we remembered, now and again, here and there, it was like he was really there. And, of course, for him in the days of his flesh, when he was with us, the meal was always the high point and everybody was welcome and he would take the bread and bless it and break it and give it to us. I remember the first time I gathered with a few friends as we had been talking about our hopes, our dreams, our disillusionments, and our sadness, and someone took the bread, it was like Jesus was there. It was as though his presence was as tangible as the presence of the

one next to me, and we knew, in that community, breaking bread together, that he was alive.

And so, as we began to understand with new eyes, as we looked at old, familiar scriptures and suddenly saw something we'd never seen before, hope began to rise in us and we began more and more to experience the wonder of that presence that was full of grace. And then, we came to the most amazing discovery of all and it was simply this - that Jesus wasn't about Jesus at all. Jesus was about God. That's why he never pointed to himself. That's why he never put himself forward. That's why he was marked by such humility, such gracefulness. That's why he was like one who refused to be the broker of the grace of God but, rather, said God is accessible to you all and grace is for you all. That's why he never set up shop and hung up his shingle because he wasn't about himself. He was about God. He was a God-presence. God was embodied somehow or other in that one, and when we were with him, we sensed the presence of God, and now the amazing thing was that he was dead and we experienced him alive, really just as before. We couldn't reach out and touch him as once we did, but he was there.

Was it his spirit? Was it God's Spirit? I don't know. But, this I know - this we came to discover, that Jesus wasn't about Jesus. Jesus was about God and the fact that Jesus was no longer in the flesh was not at all any handicap for our experience of God as we experienced it when he was in the flesh.

Can you sense what I am trying to say? I don't know how to say it any differently than that. It's like he wasn't there, but he *was there*. But, not being there, whatever we experienced when he was there, was the same, just as real. When we looked one another in the eye, when we held the one we loved, when we gathered in community, breaking bread, our eyes would be opened and we would know the presence of God.

So, you see, I guess what I want to say to you is, maybe if you could, you would have liked to have been there. But, to have been there then in the days of his flesh would be no advantage to where you are now, because, as a matter of fact, he was the mediator of that mystery of life, that ultimate ground of all being, that creative spirit, that source of all, that guide of all, that goal of all. He simply was the presence of that One living God, whom death can never destroy, and he embodied forgiveness and love and justice and peace which all of the cruelty and violence and ignorance in the world can never put to death.

So, you see, that's what the evangelists were trying to tell you when they honed the experience of the whole community over decades. They called it my story, Cleopas, and it was my story, but it wasn't really my story as though it happened just like that. Oh, there was real history there. That's why 2000 years later you're still struggling with it, but I have to admit that I am amazed and somewhat amused at how much you struggle to figure out what really happened. I want to tell you - we couldn't figure out what really happened. But, it was the presence. It was the God-presence. It was the embodiment of grace and community. It was

the deep assurance that when the powers of darkness had done their worst, light burst forth and the last word was not sadness, but joy, not a broken heart, but a burning heart, not death, but life.