

The Road to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

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The encounter these two disciples have with Jesus falls into the category of Post-Resurrection stories. The amazing and incredible event of the resurrection has taken place, and after the resurrection, Jesus appears at various times and places in ways that continue to spread the Easter joy and hope. Last Sunday we looked at the passage in John 21 where Jesus met his disciples on a sea shore with a fire whose coals were burning bright. This morning it is not a fire on a sea shore that burns, it is a fire burning within the human heart.

What is especially poignant about this story in Luke 24 is that when we meet these two disciples, the fire in their heart is not burning bright. The fire in their heart is not a small but steady flame. The fire in their heart is not even a smoldering ember. The fire in their heart has gone out. It is cold. It is lifeless. These two disciples, one named Cleopas, are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and we are told they are downcast.

Downcast? More like devastated. Just like the other disciples, these two had put all their faith in Jesus. They left nets and tax booths and families and homes to follow Jesus. Now their hopes and dreams had been smashed. Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, sentenced, condemned, and finally crucified. His dead body had been placed in a grave and a huge stone rolled in front. And what of his disciples, the ones who followed him, believed in him, and had dreams that he was the one? These disciples were crushed. No wonder their faces were downcast.

When we are introduced to these two disciples who are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus we are told they were talking about everything that had happened...in other words the death of Jesus. Without knowing exactly when these disciples met Jesus and became his followers, I suggest we give them the benefit of the doubt. What I mean is, let's assume they knew everything Jesus had done. Even if they weren't there from the very beginning, even if they weren't on board as early as the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, they had undoubtedly heard the stories told time and time again. They were well acquainted with the teaching, the touching, the healing, and the hope that countless people had experienced in and through Jesus. Maybe they even kept notes, for who Jesus was and what Jesus did was certainly noteworthy. Just as a means to try to capture the depth of their despair, imagine them reviewing all the notes of all the noteworthy events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

There was the day he stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth. It was a Sabbath day. They handed him the scroll and he read from Isaiah 61.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This was the first century equivalent of the mic drop. Bam! Today, in me, this scripture is fulfilled.

From there one blessing came after the other.

- He drove out an evil spirit.
- He had a healing service that began with Simon’s mother-in-law and soon reached the whole community.
- He called Peter to follow him and that bold disciple left a boat load of fish so that he could become a fisher of men.
- Jesus touched a leper and made him clean.
- He healed a paralyzed man and with that display of power showed he had authority to forgive sins.
- He called Levi and after that tax collector left his booth he soon hosted a party for a whole slew of sinners and fellow tax collectors and Jesus celebrated with them that sinners had found repentance.
- He taught with authority, words of blessing, words of commitment, words about a love that was costly and deep and simply amazing.
- He raised a widow’s son and he gently loved a woman who washed his feet with her tears of repentance.
- He calmed storms and he fed the multitudes.
- Peter called him Messiah. God’s voice from heaven on the Mount of Transfiguration called him, “My Son.” The crowds on Palm Sunday called him the King!

Their notebook of noteworthy events associated with Jesus of Nazareth was a binder of blessings. But now Jesus had died. Now their hearts had grown cold. Their hopes and dreams were crushed. These poor disciples, Cleopas and his friend are slogging on, step by empty step, walking on even though their journey held no hope or promise. With each step I see them ripping out a page.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me
The demons obey him
The crowds are fed...the storms are stilled...the lame are healed...sins are forgiven...the helpless find hope...

None of it matters. Not anymore. Jesus has died. If he was really the Messiah...if he was really the Son of God...if he was really the Savior...if he was really the Christ...he would be alive. Ripping pages out of a book like they were ripping the flesh out of their own hearts, they crumpled the pages and threw them down on the ground.

Cleopas and his fellow disciple are literally discarding their dreams when Jesus appears and walks with them. As is so often the case in these Post-Resurrection appearances, the disciples are kept from recognizing Jesus. They assume he is a stranger, and a mighty poorly informed stranger at that. When he asks what they are talking about they say, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” These two fellows have had their hearts ripped out by the death of Jesus, and they can’t fathom that there could even be one single person in Jerusalem who is not aware of the death that rocked their world. So they fill him in on the details, about the life of Jesus, the hopes he raised, and the devastation they experienced when he died. Their story ends with the strange news they heard about some women who visited the tomb of Jesus and were told by angels that Jesus was alive. But what can you do with news like that? Alive? Risen from the dead?

What follows for these two disciples will not only change their lives, it will set their hearts on fire. Jesus begins to speak, and his first words are jarring. “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” Did not the Messiah have to suffer? That one particular phrase is at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of the Good News about Jesus. The Messiah had to suffer.

The disciples were looking for a redeemer. Israel was looking for a redeemer. The people were looking for a redeemer. They were looking for someone who would come from God and buy back their lives, buy back their freedom, buy back their glory, buy back their dignity, buy back their honor, buy back their rightful place as children of God. They were looking for a redeemer. They were looking for the Messiah. What they didn’t understand, what they were slow of heart to understand, is that the Messiah had to suffer. That is what Jesus said to them. They didn’t recognize him. They thought he was a stranger walking along who didn’t know anything about what had happened in Jerusalem. It turns it was not a stranger, it was Jesus. And it turns out he knew everything that had happened in Jerusalem. Jesus knew everything that had happened in Jesus.

What had happened in Jerusalem when the Messiah suffered was more powerful than the events of the Exodus, when God had come to the rescue of Israel. In Exodus God saw the suffering of his people in Egypt. He heard their cries as they were slaves, oppressed and beaten down, treated as if their very lives did

not matter. God saw their suffering. God heard their cries. And God was concerned. God cared. So God came down to rescue Israel. He rescued them with mighty acts of power and deliverance. And yet maybe in the Exodus it seemed God was apart ever so much from the people. God was on high, reaching down to rescue, but always one step removed.

What happened in Jerusalem was that God fully entered into a world of oppression and misery, a world where sin had played out in ways that led to exclusion and rejection, hopelessness and despair, a world where kingdoms collided and humans like Caesar were called Lord and the precious children of God were called worthless, they were rejected, isolated, alone, and living in shame and fear. What happened in Jerusalem is that same God saw their suffering, heard their cries, was concerned, was so deeply concerned he came down to help. The help he brought was to be human, just like we are human. The help he brought was to suffer just like we suffer. But even more, for his suffering was not simply for himself, his suffering was for all of us, for all of humanity. He suffered for the thieves on the cross and he suffered for Judas. He suffered for the Pharisees and religious leaders who rejected him. He suffered for the Pilates and the Caesars who had exalted themselves to high places of honor. He suffered for his enemies. And he suffered for that sweet woman who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. He suffered for that leper who had heard the cries of unclean. He suffered for tax-collectors and sinners and he suffered for the poor, the widow, the alien, and the orphan.

He suffered, and he died. He suffered and died to redeem each and every one. He suffered and died to redeem this world, to buy this world, this whole creation back at a great price. He suffered so that the righteousness of God, so clear and evident in his life, in his relationship with the Father, in his kindness and compassion, in his justice and his mercy, he suffered so that the righteousness he had could become righteousness for us. Somehow in the suffering of Jesus, in his death and his resurrection, the righteousness that belonged to Jesus was given to us. He suffered and as a result we received salvation.

That the Messiah had to suffer is found in the story of Moses and the Exodus and the prophets and the Exile, in God's long-suffering relationship with the people of Israel. Somehow in this long and complicated relationship God was setting the stage, leaving the clues, that when the Messiah came he would have to suffer. To redeem the pain of the years of slavery, to heal the deep hurt and longing of the exile, to cover the countless acts of rebellion and idolatry, God chose the path of suffering. In the suffering of Jesus God redeemed his people and bought us back. He bought us back at such a great price. A ransom was paid. Christ became our Passover Lamb, protecting us from all harm and danger. Christ became our sacrifice of atonement, covering all that is sinful and wrong and broken and reconciling us to God. Above all, when the Messiah suffered, when Jesus suffered, God proved his love for us.

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. But it wasn't just that the Messiah had to suffer. After he suffered he would enter his glory. He would rise from the dead, triumphant over the grave and the powers of sin and the despair of darkness and the dominion of the devil. The Messiah would suffer and then he would enter his glory. Jesus is right there, walking and talking about himself, about his suffering, and about how God would not abandon him to the grave, but would raise him up to life, and to life eternally. All this time they were kept from recognizing him. Now, when they do recognize him, when the bread is broken and their eyes are opened, they cry out in amazement, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us."

At that point they run back to Jerusalem to join the other disciples, to tell their story, and to join the community that will become witnesses to the whole world. What a crazy journey it must have been. I can see them making a mad rush, and yet it is an interrupted rush, for time and time again they stop to gather all those pages of their journal they had ripped out and thrown away in despair and defeat. They had to grab the pages about the lame and the leper, the blind and the deaf. They had to capture again the pages telling of multitudes being fed and storms being calmed. They had to find that manuscript of the sermon in Nazareth where Jesus said the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor....and the year of the Lord's favor. They had to find those tender and sweet remembrances of a woman whose tears were dried and whose sins were forgiven. That was truly a love story. They had to find that precious account of a prodigal son who returned to the kisses and tears of a loving Father. They had to find all the pages, for all the stories were true. Jesus was the Messiah. Oh yes, he suffered, but his suffering was redemptive. It made the whole world right.

I wonder if your heart has ever burned within you as you heard the story of Jesus, of his suffering and his death, and yes, of his glorious resurrection. So often those moments when our hearts burn within us are related to music, to hymns, to songs that tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

- On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame
- When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.
- And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood. Died he for me, who caused him pain, for me, who him, to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

- I cannot tell how silently he suffered, as with his peace he graced this place of tears. Or how his heart upon the cross was broken, the crown of pain to three and thirty years. But this I know, he heals the broken hearted and stays our sin and calms our lurking fear, and lifts the burden from the heavy laden, for yet the Savior of the world is here.

One that is particularly meaningful to me, one that always starts my heart to burning, is based on the words of the prophet Isaiah, who tells us of a servant who will suffer. Through his suffering, we will find healing. This one who suffers is called the Man of Sorrows. But it is a sweet sorrow, for through his sorrow, we are saved.

- Man of Sorrows what a name, for the Son of God who came. Ruined sinners to reclaim, Hallelujah! What a Savior.

O Lord, set our hearts on fire. Let us join the great crowd of witnesses that gives glory and honor to the Messiah who suffered, for surely the Messiah who suffers is the one who saves.