

Luke 24:1-35
“Recognizing Jesus”

Introduction

No other resurrection account intrigues me as much as does this story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. I come back to it year after year because nowhere else in all the gospels do I see myself depicted more clearly than here in these verses.

It is Easter morning, the day of victory and triumph. God has fulfilled his promise to vanquish everything that would hurt or destroy us. Our final enemy, death, has been swallowed up in Christ's victory. All of this was promised in the Scriptures, and all of this Jesus clearly told his disciples he would do. And yet here we have two of Jesus' own disciples on the road leading *away* from Jerusalem downcast, depressed and defeated. How can this be? How can they have missed the moment of greatest victory?

Part of the reason is, of course, the sheer and utter horror of the cross. It has been described accurately as “state-sponsored terrorism.” The Romans used the cross as an instrument of intimidation, something so terrifying and horrible, that even strong people quaked at the thought of it. The disciples ran from the one they loved and trusted because they did not, under any circumstances, want to end up nailed to a cross beam, slowly suffocating, their bodies left to be devoured by birds of prey.

But now, suddenly, the most unexpected, unbelievable thing happens: This same Jesus who has just been crucified and buried suddenly joins them on the road, walks along with them and engages them in conversation, asking why they are so depressed. Surely now their eyes will be opened and their fear and sorrow will be turned to relief and joy! But no – they don't even recognize him. Why? How are we to believe such a story, and if we believe it, how are we to understand it? What can it teach us, what can it tell us, on this Easter morning?

Perhaps we might do better asking why such a story should surprise us at all. Many of us, who fill churches today in celebration of Christ's victory, are depressed about the past, unhappy with our present situation, and worried about the future. We may sing the songs of resurrection and – at one level – believe in Christ's victory, offer our prayers, hear the Easter story told again, enjoy the prospect of a lovely East Tennessee spring day, and go home for our Easter dinner, without ever having recognized Jesus in our midst, without ever realizing that it is his desire to accompany us on our journey every day. If we do not recognize him in the midst of an Easter celebration such as this, how will ever we know him when he meets on the road tomorrow?

This morning I would invite you to look with me at four questions that are raised and answered by our text.

Body

1. Why are these disciples cast down and depressed on the day of resurrection?

The apparent reason: The reality of the situation. The one in whom they have placed their hope for liberation has been publicly executed. They are focused on the news, on the events of the past week, on the radical reversal of momentum between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. So too, you may say, I have good reason for being depressed about things. But the real reason for our depression lies elsewhere, as it did for these men.

The real underlying reason: Unbelief. All the way up the road to Jerusalem, Jesus has been telling his disciples that he will be handed over and put to death, but the on the third day he will rise from the dead. Incredibly, instead of waiting for the fulfillment of his words, they say, "And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us" (24:21,22). They are listening to the wrong news, to the bad news that does not take into account the power of the living God. The news of today must always be understood in the light of God's good news.

How like us today, who are tempted not to believe in the reality and power of God's victory over everything that would seek to thwart his purposes in human history and to separate us from his love in Jesus Christ. Jesus clearly told us that, if we followed him, we would face the same kind of trouble and distress that all people face, and that he himself faced, with one crucial difference: the trouble that we face, the failures and falls, the things we do and the things done to us, have no power to separate us from his love or to keep him from living through us, provided we are learning to walk in the light of his resurrection, and in the power of his outpoured Spirit.

It is our tendency to interpret God's Word in the light of the daily news and our own experiences – rather than to interpret the daily news and our own experiences in the light of God's Word – that causes us to live in a state of fear and anxiety, of disappointment with God and with ourselves. This is why they were cast down that first Easter, and why so many of us are cast down today.

2. Why don't they recognize Jesus?

The apparent reason: His face was probably covered in the fashion of a middle easterner walking a dusty road, and frankly, they are not expecting him. You don't expect to meet dead people walking down the road. And in their minds, his death was the end of their hopes. After all, according to John's gospel (19:25), Cleopas's wife, Mary, was among the women who witnessed Jesus' death. They have heard, of course, that very morning the stories of the women who returned from the tomb, saying that it was empty and that Jesus was risen. But they have given the report no credence: Just a few women who loved Jesus so much that they are refusing to

accept the awful reality of his death and are having a hysterical reaction. With unconscious irony they ask Jesus, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (24:18).

The real underlying reason: Once again, unbelief. "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken!" (24:25). They have failed to believe all that the Scriptures taught of the One who was to come. They believed the triumphant texts such as Isaiah 54 but not those such as Isaiah 53 that speak of the suffering and death of Israel's Savior. We, too, are extremely selective in the passages of Scripture that we embrace and believe.

3. **How does Jesus open their eyes so that they recognize him?**

In order to recognize Jesus, three things are needed:

First, he met them on the road: His presence got their attention. They did not yet recognize him, but his presence got them thinking and talking about the things that matter most. We cannot recognize someone who is not there, and just as surely today as that first Easter, Christ must be physically present with us on the road as we journey through life. And the simple truth is that he meets us over and over again on life's road, questioning us, challenging us, offering himself to us, but we fail to recognize him.

Now here is a key for those of us who claim to be his disciples: the call of the church is to *be* the Body of Christ, filling the world, meeting people on whatever road they walk, asking them why they are cast down and depressed, representing to them the compassion and love of Christ. If we have not yet met him, if we are not yet sure that he is risen and active in our lives, then we need to press on in our search until he opens our eyes and reveals himself to us. But if we are his people, then it is our privilege to reveal him to others. This is one reason why it is so very important that we begin to walk out the things we claim to believe.

Secondly, he explained the Scriptures to them: As Jesus taught them the Scriptures their "hearts burned within them" (24:32). They did not yet know why, but something awakened within them, a longing that would not be satisfied by anything less than Jesus' own presence.

How does Jesus speak to us today? Just as he did back then: through the Scriptures. Of course, Jesus communicates through many different things: through the world around us, through people, through circumstances, and through our own inner conviction of truth. But the only way to test those different voices is against the sure and certain written Word of God.

This is what Jesus did in his ministry. The Scriptures were always his touchstone. He convinced his disciples by explaining the meaning of the Scriptures to them. So also today, if you would hear Jesus speak, you must spend time in the Scriptures, asking

him to make his word clear to your mind and heart. He still speaks supremely through his written Word. And we who are his Body must be, not only willing to walk with people in love and compassion, but able to open the Scriptures for them.

And thirdly, he broke bread with them: Their hearts have been set on fire, they have been filled with longing for God's Word to be true, his promises fulfilled, and they realize that somehow this stranger walking with them on the road holds the key to God's doing his work in their lives. They prevail upon him not to go on up the road, but to turn aside and spend the evening with them, and to share their meal. It is at table, as Jesus breaks bread, that their eyes are opened, as so often today the eyes of God's people are opened once again as we gather around the Lord's table and hear him say, "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood of the New Covenant, given for the remission of sins."

4. And so, it remains but to ask, what must we do to recognize Jesus today?

Invite him in: "They urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent' " (24:29). Knowing Jesus requires something more than a casual conversation along the road. It is more than an occasional Sunday service of worship. It is a life. It begins by asking him in, by urging him strongly, "Stay!"

Give him the place of honor: When he comes into our life, into our home, it is not as a mere guest. He will not be satisfied simply to take a place at our table. He is the Lord. His proper place is at the head of the table. In the ancient Near East, the master of the feast took the bread, broke it and gave thanks. So here, "When he was at table with them, he took the bread, and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (24:33,31).

Conclusion

If you long to recognize him on the road tomorrow, I ask you this morning if you've invited him into your life, into your home, and whether you have given him the place of honor and authority at the head of your table? When Christ serves the meal, our eyes are opened, and we realize why our hearts were set ablaze by the Scriptures. He is in our midst, risen and triumphant over sin and death. Now we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, that the things that have depressed us and frightened us no longer have any power over us. Christ is risen, and nothing will ever be the same.

Do you long to know that resurrection power this Easter? Do you long to see the resurrected Lord of life? Ask him in. *He is more ready to answer your prayer than you are to ask him.* Don't leave this morning without doing business with the one who entered history so that we might live with him in eternity. And that new life begins now for those in whom the resurrected Lord comes and makes his home. When he meets you on the road this week, will you recognize him?