

## **When Jesus Meets Us**

Our New Testament reading is Luke 24:13-35. This account of the appearance of the risen Jesus to two disciples from Emmaus has been called “a small masterpiece,” a beautiful word portrait by the literary artistry of Evangelist Luke (NT Wright). The identity of these two disciples, one named Cleopas, is basically unknown. It’s important that Luke doesn’t tell us their identity so we can identify ourselves with the unnamed companion of Cleopas. Put yourself in the place of this disciple that Jesus meets on the 7-mile road to from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Read **Luke 24:13-35**.

*<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup> but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup> And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup> Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” <sup>19</sup> He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” <sup>27</sup> Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” <sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup> They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

One of the most convincing evidences that Jesus actually arose from death to life was the transformation in the disciples themselves. Following his crucifixion, their hopes were dashed because they had failed to grasp Jesus' teachings about the necessity of his death and resurrection. They cowered in depression and fear until they were visited by their risen Lord. Also, these resurrection accounts in the four gospels are anything but flattering to the disciples, who're portrayed as dull of mind to grasp Jesus' teaching, slow of heart to believe, and subject to disappointment, despair and spiritual depression. This is the picture we have of these two followers of Jesus, who meets them on the road back to their home in Emmaus on Resurrection Sunday.

Like these followers of Jesus, you and I will always be challenged by the disappointing circumstances of life. And because we're often unprepared and weak in faith, we can easily move from disappointment to despair and from despair to spiritual depression. This is the condition in which we find these "professing believers" and devoted followers of Jesus.

Jl Packer compares the "spiritual perplexity" of these two Emmaus disciples with what "every child of God experiences sooner or later." He writes, "Be warned: it can be appallingly painful, and if you are not prepared to meet it, it can embitter you, maim you emotionally, and to a great extent destroy you—which, be it said, is Satan's goal in it, every time. What happens," continues Packer, "is that you find yourself feeling that God plays cat and mouse with you. Having lifted you up by giving you hope, he now seems to throw you down by destroying it. What he gave you to lean on he suddenly takes away, and down you go. Your feelings say that he is mocking you, taking pleasure in frustrating you and making you miserable. He must be a heartless, malicious ogre after all. So, you feel broken in pieces, and no wonder."

The risen Christ meets these two disciples in the midst of serious disappointment. Philip Yancey writes that "Disappointment implies a hoped for relationship that somehow has not worked out." The Emmaus disciples were disappointed with the thought that their relationship with Jesus and all the hopes they had in his deliverance and kingship had vanished. He was dead. God's promises were not true after all.

Again, Packer says that examples of disappointment are easy to find. He continues, "here are a couple who marry in the Lord to serve him together, who dedicate their home, wealth, and in due course children to him, and yet find nothing but trouble—health trouble, money trouble, trouble with relatives and in-laws and maybe (the most bitter thing of all) trouble with their own offspring. What hurts Christian parents more than seeing the children whom they tried to raise for God give up Christianity? But do not say that these things never happen to truly faithful folk;" warns Packer. "You know perfectly well that they

do. And when they do, the pain is increased by the feeling that God has turned against you, and is actively destroying the hopes that he himself once gave you.”

Not unlike the other followers of Jesus, these two had been nursing hopes that were rooted in their yearning for immediate deliverance from their political enemies and military oppressors, the Romans. They also were hoping for an immediate regime change in the religious dominance of the Pharisees, who had opposed the teaching of their Lord Jesus. They had hopes for an immediate improvement in their life situation and circumstances. That for them was the definition of redemption (21).

When the risen Jesus “intercepted” these disciples they were commiserating with each other over their dashed hopes that were based on a serious misunderstanding of Jesus’ teachings and the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. Their perspective was not one of biblical hope but was rather shaped by the kingdoms of this world, such as worldly politics and flawed governments. They thought that the kingdom Jesus brought was on the same level of operating, that is, by human initiative, power and ingenuity. To them, being a member of the kingdom of God would mean the end of a life of struggle and would result in comfort, worldly peace and immediate prosperity. They were following Christ without a cross.

And tragically, this fatally flawed message about the kingdom of God is still being perpetrated today. The prosperity and success gospel continues to be proclaimed, and not just by wild-eyed, televised evangelists. This false gospel with a dangerously limited and misleading message is being proclaimed in churches that promise a life of success in all areas of human endeavor. They appeal to people on the same bases used by all marketers and advertisers—“Christianity works and is the answer to all of your problems.” These false, materialistic hopes are doomed to failure from the start when they face the ultimate test of suffering, loss and death.

These disciples should have understood, from the things Jesus had said, but they were stuck in their unbelief. And even today, after another 2,000 years’ worth of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, we get bogged down in unbelief. Life’s disappointments seem to swallow up any vestige of remaining faith. If asked about our beliefs we would probably give sound affirmations about the reality of God and the resurrection. Yet our weak faith falters in the face of life’s difficulties and disappointments. It’s during life’s crises and trials that faith should give us grace to benefit and grow from them and to see the hand of God at work through them. When life kicks us in the rear, our faith should kick into gear. But sadly, when we go through the valley of the shadow of suffering and even death, we often forget the Good Shepherd is with us (Ps. 23).

You may be, like these disciples from Emmaus, suffering from disappointment, which has possibly moved to distress, despair and even depression. You may

not even be in a mood to hear about the new possibilities for hope. These disciples, with their faces downcast, didn't even raise their faces to look at Jesus (17). But Jesus revealed himself to these disappointed, defeated disciples, beginning with a mild, but unmistakable rebuke. By saying that they were foolish and slow of heart to believe Jesus was not calling them morons but rather was saying they were obtuse in insight. The tone of Jesus' rebuke was not contemptuous but rather compassionate: "O you dear silly souls' would get the nuance" of Jesus' rebuke (Packer). Jesus rebuked their misunderstanding of Scripture. Although they had heard teaching from Jesus' own lips they had failed to understand and to believe. And today we have so much information and so many Bible studies and yet we also fail to hear what Jesus is saying.

Their minds were made up about Jesus' bringing and immediate Utopia on earth and they became selective listeners and were able to filter out the parts of the truth that didn't suit their fancy. Primarily, the reason they couldn't believe in a risen Savior is their inability to accept a dying Savior. And so Jesus gave them an intensive lesson about the necessity of the cross. "*Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*" (26). The concept of a suffering and dying Savior was as offensive to the first disciples as it is to people today. After his great confession of who Christ is, Peter tried to get Jesus to avoid the cross (Matt.16:16, 22f). The message of the cross, says Paul, is foolishness to the perishing (1 Cor. 1:18) and his call to his followers to take the way of the cross, of self-denial, is unwelcome.

What one of us would not have loved to have been along for that walking Bible study, as Jesus led them through the Scriptures, telling how he was prophesied from Genesis onward? I imagine his telling how his character was portrayed through the law and wisdom books, his mission symbolized in the priesthood, and his salvation prefigured in the story of Israel's salvation. Perhaps his main focus was on the prophecy of Isaiah, who portrayed so graphically the suffering of God's servant in his 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter. And thus Jesus showed that the Scriptures do, in their entirety, speak of him (Jn. 5:39). And you and I have the completed Word that speaks of Jesus.

When Jesus first came to these disciples, they didn't want to give him the time of day. But after spending perhaps a couple of hours in his presence, they don't want to let him out of their sight (29). When the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus he gives a deep longing and strong desire to know him. Here at the table in Emmaus, Jesus the guest takes the bread and begins to serve as the host. Then the eyes of these disciples are opened to recognize that their guest/host is Jesus. Perhaps too these disciples, as they looked at Jesus' hands, saw the nail scars.

As soon as these disciples recognized that their guest was Jesus, he disappeared, transitioning to them a new way of knowing him. No longer will

they depend on physical sight, but now they know him by faith. This is the beatitude that Jesus told Thomas would be upon all of us (Jn. 20:29).

After Jesus disappeared from their sight, the Emmaus disciples agreed that while Jesus talked with them and taught the Scriptures to them their hearts burned within them (32). We often go through periods in our Christian life described as a "dark night of the soul," when God seems silent and to have removed all emotional and outward assurances and comfort. I was challenged to read the accounts of the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta about her long period of deep darkness, when she struggled for assurance while giving of herself to the desperately poor and dying street people of Calcutta. Though her comforts were gone, her faith was tenaciously strong.

Before they saw the risen Lord, these two were disappointed, distressed, defeated, despairing and depressed. Their hopes for being part of a new, triumphant kingdom had been lost, lost in a borrowed tomb outside the city of Jerusalem. But when they were met by the risen Jesus, they were transformed into convinced and empowered, death-defying witnesses.

There'll be moments in our lives when we'll be disappointed with God and distressed by our circumstances and in despair over what seems like a hopeless future. This will lead to emotional and spiritual depression. (Those who are clinically depressed need the consultation of a physician as well as pastoral care and the prayer support of a spiritual family. Jesus can meet you through the care of a professional therapist or counselor.) All of us will experience times of disappointment, distress, despair and spiritual depression. But the risen Jesus is here to join us on our way, just as he did these Emmaus disciples. When we're on the road that leads to life's disappointments and despair, Jesus comes to meet us. He met me at the lowest points in my life, just when I desperately needed him. He'll meet you now. Invite him in.