

14 April 2024

The Other One at Emmaus

Luke 24:13-33

Last week we heard about a resurrection appearance that is only found in John. Today we read one that is only found in Luke. We read chapter 24, verses 13-33.

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?' ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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.' ²⁵Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?' ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

"If I could . . . if I could just say a word here. Thank you. As you know, I don't normally put myself forward in church disputes . . . I'm sorry, *discussions*. I'm old and sometimes I can't tell which is which. But having sat here listening to this discussion for these past hours, I feel I should say a word. We are all agreed, I believe, that Jesus will return, and that we should be looking for him. But, as others have pointed out, it has now been fifty years since he returned to the Father, and as memories fade, we must consider how we shall recognize him when he comes. So, as I understand it, you all expect him to appear with signs and wonders, but cannot decide which signs to look for. I believe I am the last one in this church who knew Our Lord personally, who encountered him both before his death and afterwards, so perhaps I can shed some light on how to recognize our Lord.

“Now, before his crucifixion, it was easy to identify Jesus. Not because he was so physically striking – in fact, he was rather ordinary-looking – but because he was the one surrounded by crowds. I never saw him alone, at least until I saw him die. There were no adoring crowds then. But before his crucifixion doesn’t really matter. We do not seek the artisan of Nazareth; we seek the Risen Christ. So let me tell you my story.

“Many of you, I imagine, have read the good news as it was collected by Paul’s companion Luke. If so, you were surely struck by the story he told at the end, about two disciples who encountered Christ on the road to Emmaus. Luke had that story from my old friend Cleopas, which is why he remembered *his* name. I was the other one.

“It was late afternoon on the first day of the week, about the tenth hour, and Cleopas and I were supposed to have been in Emmaus hours before, but we had lingered in Jerusalem, waiting for more news of what the women said they had seen. Finally we could wait no longer and we left, still talking it all over. Jesus’ body was no longer in the tomb; the women said they had seen an angel, or maybe two – the story was a bit muddled; Mary Magdalene said she had actually seen him, but had she? She also said she hadn’t recognized him at first. That made no sense to us. Cleopas and I were just deciding that Mary must have been hallucinating when I noticed that we weren’t alone. A man was walking on Cleopas’s other side whom neither of us had seen approach. ‘Oh, hello!’ I said.

“ ‘Forgive me for coming up on you so suddenly,’ he replied, ‘but I was interested in what you were talking about. What has happened?’

“Cleopas said, ‘Are you coming from Jerusalem?’ The man nodded. ‘Do you live under a rock there? Everyone’s talking about this!’

“The man smiled and said, ‘Tell me.’

“So we did. We told him all about Jesus, about the things he had done, the mighty works, the healings, the teachings. Cleopas said, ‘We had thought he might even be the Christ.’

“ ‘Did you?’ the man said, politely.

“Then I said, ‘But then he was turned in to the chief priests, and they took him to the Roman governor and he crucified him. This was just a few days ago. It crushed all our hopes.’

“ ‘It was a surprise to you, then?’ the man asked. You know, it’s funny. I could not describe the man’s face to you if I had to, but I remember his expression. It was the expression of a man sighing and rolling his eyes on the inside.

“I went on, ‘But then, just this morning some of the women who had followed him came to us and told us that his body was gone. They said that angels had told them he had risen. One of them said she had seen him herself, though she didn’t recognize him at first. But how can that be, to not recognize someone that you know?’

“ ‘Very strange, indeed,’ the man said.

“Cleopas took over then. He said, ‘Anyway, that’s what we were talking about. We just don’t know what to make of these reports.’

“ ‘Well, what are your options?’

“ ‘The obvious conclusion is that the women were overwrought and imagined it,’ I said. ‘But Jesus’ body really is gone. So I’m thinking that there were also grave robbers.’

“The man made his pained face again and said in a patient voice, ‘Are there any other options you can think of?’

“Cleopas and I looked at each other, and I said, ‘Not really, no.’

“This time the man really did sigh. Finally he said, ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but isn’t that kind of blockheaded of you? Have you never read the prophets?’

“I was inclined to take offense, but before I could tell him off, Cleopas – good old Cleopas – said, ‘Tell us what you mean.’

“And so he did. All the way to Emmaus, he went step by step through the prophets. He talked about Jeremiah and the New Covenant. He talked about Ezekiel and the heart of stone being transformed into the heart of flesh. And he talked about the Servant in Isaiah, the Servant who suffered for others, who bore their sins and accepted their punishment meekly. And he talked about Hosea’s promise that death itself would be defanged and defeated. He put it all together in a way that I’d never heard, but it also all made sense. He sounded almost like Jesus, I thought. Yeah, I know. At last, at the outskirts of town, I said, ‘So you’re saying that the women might be right. He might actually be risen.’

“ ‘It’s worth considering,’ he said.

“Cleopas said, ‘And if that’s so, he might still be the Christ!’

“ ‘It’s worth considering.’

“At that moment, we arrived at the house. I was sorry the journey was over, but I said, ‘Well, this is us,’ and he said, ‘All right. It was good to talk with you,’ and started to walk on.

“But Cleopas said, ‘Don’t go,’ and he stopped. ‘Stay. Eat with us.’

“ ‘Is that what you want?’

“We both said, ‘Yes!’ So he came in. We gathered bread and some cheese and olives and wine for a meal, and as we gathered at the table, he said, ‘May I bless this meal?’

“We nodded, and he picked up the bread and broke it. And I almost fainted for joy. Because I had seen that before! It was the Lord. Our eyes were opened, and we understood. He began to laugh, and then . . . then he was gone.

“Cleopas looked at me. ‘It was him, wasn’t it?’ I nodded. Cleopas said, ‘Why did I not know him? All the time we walked together, it was like my heart was on fire!’

“ ‘Yours, too?’ I gasped. ‘But it didn’t hurt. It made me lighter.’

“Cleopas said, ‘We have to go back and tell the others.’ And so we did.

“For fifty years now this story has been my inspiration, my consolation, my courage. I met the Risen Christ on the first day. I was there. And so, as you have argued – I’m sorry, *discussed* – which signs to look for when looking for the Lord, his words came back to me. ‘Isn’t that kind of blockheaded of you?’

“Let me tell you what I have learned in fifty years of living with my experience. How will you recognize Christ? Perhaps at first you won’t. But here are some things to remember.

First, don't only look to find him in your leaders. He didn't appear to our leaders, the honored ones, the inner circle, the Twelve – not at first. He appeared to the women. Then he appeared to Cleopas and me: two nobodies, hangers-on, fringe followers. Second, he is not revealed by external signs; he reveals himself, when and to whom it suits him. Stop looking for signs; look for the Lord. Third, he will not force his revelation on you. He wants to be invited. My heart breaks when I think that I almost missed him. He would have walked on if Cleopas had not said, 'Stay.' Fourth, when you do finally recognize him, you will probably find that he has been with you all along, teaching, guiding, leading. Much of the time, it seems to me, the Lord reveals himself in retrospect.

“So where should we seek Christ? Not out there, not someday, not in wonders, but here, in this gathering (provided we can ever stop *discussing* so loudly) Here: in the reading of scripture, the joining in prayer, and in the breaking of the bread. That's all I have to say. Forgive me for taking so much of your time.”