



Back to the city in a hurry!

Luke 24:13-35

I want to speak to you about the Emmaus Road; a passage that is both a literary and a spiritual jewel. At one and the same time, it is a moving story, a testimony to the resurrection, an explanation of the empty tomb, and an occasion for Luke, as a gospel writer, to summarise many of those themes that he has been exploring in his gospel ... yet it is profoundly different from the other Easter accounts. It is, therefore, worth exploring again, even though I spoke from it at our Easter Sunrise Service.

Very often writers touch on issues in a book and then, in the final chapter, the subject re-appears with greater impact. There is a long journey from the beginning of Luke's closing chapter to its end. Luke starts, as Mark does, with the account of fearful women, and ends with the disciples embarking on a mission to the world. Luke 24 has three sections and a conclusion. We are dealing with the central scene and what Bishop Tom Wright has called "the vehicle for his central message". He moves on to tell of the events on the road to Emmaus. The opening words of verse 13 "Now that same day..." links this passage to the entire Resurrection account.

Two disciples, one of whom is named Cleopas, are returning from Jerusalem to Emmaus and they are in deep discussion. They are joined by an apparent stranger, who professes ignorance of the events which are causing them to be downcast.

This account tells of how He comes alongside us...

- Where we are...
- In whatever dilemma we face...
- On the journey of life...

The location of Emmaus is still uncertain and there are careful arguments regarding two possible sites. We are told that it is eleven or twelve kilometres from Jerusalem, because in the Greek it talks about three score furlongs. The location, however, is not of paramount importance. In verse 18, we are also told Cleopas' name, but nothing further is known about him.

One scholar wrote: "Cleopas and his friend were simply going home, but by that Easter evening they found themselves back in Jerusalem—and who knows where they went from there."

Gunther Bornkamm wrote in "Jesus of Nazareth": "The men and women who encounter the risen Christ in the Easter stories have come to an end of their wisdom. They are alarmed and disturbed by His death, mourners wandering about the grave of their Lord in their helpless love, and trying like the women at the grave with pitiable means to stay the process and odour of corruption, disciples huddled fearfully together like animals in a thunderstorm.

"So it is, too, with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the evening of Easter Day; their last hopes, too, are destroyed. One would have to turn all the Easter stories upside down, if one wanted to present them in the words of Faust: 'They are celebrating the resurrection of the Lord, for they themselves are resurrected'...they are anything but resurrected!"

There is, in Luke, what some have described as a travel theme, especially discovered in his unique central section in Chapters 9–19—and the fact that this event occurs when the two disciples "were going" in verse 13, and in verse 15 "they walked along"—seems to make that link very clear.



A friend of mine, the late Professor Howard Marshall of Aberdeen, picks up on the similarity with the journey motif found in Acts 8 and 9: the Ethiopian Eunuch and the Conversion of St Paul. In this passage also, there is a request to stay longer.

They were filled with sadness

We are told in verse 17, "they stood still, their faces downcast".

Almost all of us, who have lived a reasonable length of time, would have encountered a degree of sadness within ourselves or others. What we have to ask in this biblical context is why the disciples were downcast.

Two disciples of Christ were walking home one Sunday afternoon from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Their hearts were heavy and their faces sad. They had believed Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Perhaps they had joined in the triumphal procession only a week before his death.

They may well have been expecting him to overturn the Romans. Perhaps they had watched him in the Temple, when he overturned the tables.

But a week from that day, everything was so different. In almost stupefied unbelief they had seen Pilate give in to the pressure of the crowd—and order that Jesus be crucified.

We might feel it appropriate to ask: What kind of sadness was it? Misinterpretation of emotions lies at the root of much difficulty in Christian churches.

I can identify three justifiable reasons why the disciples may feel sad:

- They feel sad because they know bereavement. They have been with Jesus and they experience a sadness having lost a dear friend who is, in their minds, dead for ever.
- They are sad because somehow a perplexity has occurred within their mental process. They had believed Jesus Christ to be the Truth—now he is dead—and it looks as though evil will be victorious.
- They are sad because, in a sense, they have forfeited their life. There is bound to be selfishness within them which they cannot ignore.

Verse 21 contains some really significant words—"we had hoped". I am talking about Christian hope, but shattered dreams are what we find here! In our modern world, we too can be at the point of leaving Jerusalem, as if on the brink of giving up—and need the experience which transforms sadness into living faith.

Now they were relating to the stranger who joined them on the road and who walked by their side. Their vision was so clouded by sorrow that they did not recognise who he was.

As G. B. Caird in his commentary makes quite clear: "It is a remarkable fact that all the time he was with them, the idea never crossed their minds that he was any other than a being of flesh and blood, a foreigner on a visit to Jerusalem."



The sadness they feel has been made worse because people sought to take away even the dignity they had. Notice in Verse 21—"And what is more"—and in Verse 22—"In addition"—and in Verse 24—"Him they did not see."

- Heavy with sorrow—v.17.
- Filled with disappointment—v.21.
- Completely bewildered—v.v. 22-24.

There is much sadness in the world in which we live, and we will need to deal with the real experiences of life. When I think of the sadness in terrorist activity, largely on our own doorstep, the cross and resurrection tell me that God does not lift his people out of the world, but encourages them to face up to real life and, with the grace of our Lord Jesus, engage in the midst, on the journey and in the struggle.

Their response was slow

Verses 25 and 26 give us the words of Jesus to them—"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

One scholar comments, "The stranger seizes the platform from the confused disciples".

When they had finished their recital of pain and suffering, Jesus chided them for their failure to understand the scriptures. Jesus himself expounded the Old Testament, for we are told in verse 27 that he began with Moses and all the prophets and explained what the scriptures had to say about him...a DVD of that last chapter of Luke would be most interesting!

We have all had experiences of being slow of heart. This is a different issue from sadness, for here it is not our experience or emotion that is the problem; it is our unwillingness to believe.

- We are slow of heart to believe—we are much more ready to believe others rather than God. Christian witness faces this challenge as people are often ready to believe the latest new idea, rather than the substance of what has been handed down to us.
- We have a sharpness of mind in belief, but not a ready heart. The Pauline affirmation of believing and confessing is helpful.
- Here the disciples are slow of heart, after being taught by Jesus Christ himself.

At least the disciples were listening—and, consequently, there was bound to be hope. It would lead to their invitation for Jesus to stay and eat, following the custom of hospitality. It may well have been the way he spoke that led them to want to know more?

It was at the supper table that it all happened. In the old familiar way, "He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them". We are told quite clearly "then their eyes were opened and they recognised him".

The spiritual eye is like an inward faculty which accurately corresponds to the natural eye. That eye, like the body, admits to being either open or closed. This inner-eye needs to be opened.



The whole of the afternoon's conversation would begin to dawn upon them. There is a sense of awe in their conversation as they recapitulate the events.

The recognition scene is unquestionably the high point in the narrative, while from a church perspective the relationship to Holy Communion is unquestionably clear. We must not lose touch with the table scene which is characteristic of Luke.

The firm foundations of the Christian faith are in the hope of the Risen Lord. This is the non-negotiable centre of the Christian faith. However, resurrection is not just in history—it happens as we allow him to come alongside us.

They returned to Jerusalem in a hurry!

After making the obvious comment about the slowness of their response, the whole picture changes in verse 33 when we are told "they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem".

They were weary. That point would make the eleven kilometre walk even more tiring, because I think weariness is more than just being tired. It involves all kinds of other factors. A person who is full of joy and has nothing heavy on his heart can walk eleven kilometres easily without tiring, but with a heavy heart the journey feels longer than ever.

Friends at Wesley Mission know I am on a continual journey with a Fitbit. I realise there are different kinds of catch-up with my walks—for example, at 11.50pm one night, compared to a pleasant evening after a good day.

As a pastor, I have made some of those journeys—for myself and for others. Breaking the news of the death of a loved one can feel as though you are carrying a great burden, which does not fall easily because you impart the news. I recall visiting a man with the news that his dear wife had been killed—and that journey was such a difficult one.

The news that Jesus Christ is risen changed what was going on in their hearts. This news was too wonderful to keep to themselves. They must share it with the sorrowing disciples back in Jerusalem ... It was Missionally Motivated!

The experience at the table was vital, but they further reflected (v.32), "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us." The experience produced speed, energy and vision.

When the Emmaus disciples arrived back, they could hardly get a word in, for they were greeted with news of the resurrection—but that did not matter. What did make a difference to them was that the unconscious presence of God had come alongside them, just as he can come alongside any one of us.

How this happens is different for each of us and I believe the resurrection appearances are helpful in this respect:

- Early morning in the garden
- In the Upper Room
- On the Emmaus Road



So it is with our lives—they are often very different and yet there is the consistency of the power of God and the eagerness to share his risen presence with others.

The result of this coming alongside was:

- A deep, inward sense of the presence of God.
- An instinctive sense of a work to be done.
- A willingness to tell others of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to say, "Let the story speak for itself".

Whenever the unconscious presence of God comes alongside us, it gives us hearts ready to share, even when the journey is painful.

The fear of the disciples was translated into a vibrant faith which led them to return with speed to Jerusalem—and the unconscious presence of God was at work within them.

Tom Wright makes the point: "In Luke's work, as in the other narratives, there is no hint that the primary meaning of Jesus' resurrection has anything to do with anyone else's personal post-mortem future." The conclusion is not "You too can have life after death" or anything like it, "but rather that the whole purpose of God's plan for Israel and the world has come to an unexpected climax and we've now to implement it in the world."

- Hope beyond death—of course.
- Hope in life—a new vision for this world.

There is a story of the young person reading the gospel in church. When reaching the last verse, she added—"Here ends the Gospel". Someone was heard to growl—"I hope NOT!"