

The Road to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35 ¹³ Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, ¹⁴ and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. ¹⁵ And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped, looking downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹ And he replied to them, “What sort of things?” They said to him, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. ²¹ But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. ²² Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning ²³ and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.”

²⁵ And he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. ²⁹ But they urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. ³² Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”

³³ So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them ³⁴ who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The movement of faith

This coming Sunday is the [3rd Sunday of Easter](#) and our gospel is the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This account takes place on the first day of the week, that “very day” - Easter Sunday in our parlance. Jesus has been raised from the dead but all the disciples have discovered is the empty tomb. The first witnesses to the empty tomb are all women: *Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; the others who accompanied them* (Lk 24:10). They tell the news to the disciples, but such news was unexpected and “*their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them*” (v.11). In such confusion are sown the seeds of doubt.

As Joel Green notes (842), the Emmaus story fits into a large Lucan narrative about perception and response. From the initial witness of the women we have the possibility (vv.1-12) which gives way to the probability of Emmaus (vv.13-35), and probability to actuality in Jesus’ appearance to the disciples in the upper room (vv.36-49). All is finally resolved in vv.50-53 when after the Ascension the disciples return to Jerusalem ready for mission. While describing an event that all takes place on Sunday of the Resurrection, Luke also has crafted a narrative that has been recognized as a metaphor for the movement of faith from what is almost simple evidentiary and proof to a faith that is trusting and which demands a response.

The structure of the Emmaus account follows this progression within the boundaries of its own narrative. Green (842) suggests the following chiasmic structure:

A Chiasmic Structure with the Road to Emmaus pericope:

- The journey from Jerusalem (vv.14-15)
- Appearance yet lack of recognition (v.16)
- Interaction (vv.17-18)
- Summary of the “things” (vv.19-21)
- Empty tomb and vision (vv.22-23a)
- Jesus is Alive (v.23b)
- Empty tomb and no vision (v.24)
- Interpretation of the “things” (vv.25-27)
- Interaction (vv.28-30)
- Opened eyes and recognition (vv.31-32)
- The journey to Jerusalem (vv.33-35)

Within the context of the Emmaus story, Luke will also extend themes ever present in the gospel to this point: journey, table fellowship and fulfillment of Scripture.

Unable to see

Luke sets the scene with markers of time (*that very day*), place (on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus) and situation – two disciples who earlier had been with the disciples, heard the women’s testimony and apparently discounted their testimony as idle wistfulness. The community of believers has been fractured. As it recounts in v.17, the “*looked downcast.*”

Elsewhere in the Gospel according to Luke “eyes” and “sight” have been correlated with comprehension, faith and salvation:

- Zechariah’s canticle, the *Benedictus*, especially 1:78-79;
- Simeon’s canticle, *Nunc Dimitis*, 2:30: “*for my eyes have seen your salvation*”;
- The parable of the Good Samaritan who sees, 10:23;
- “*The lamp of the body is your eye. When your eye is sound, then your whole body is filled with light, but when it is bad, then your body is in darkness*” 11:34; and
- the healing of the blind beggar, 18:35-42;

For most of the part of the gospel referred to as the “Journey to Jerusalem” (9:51 – 18:14) the disciples have witnessed Jesus’ teaching, mighty deeds, and revelation of his heavenly Father. But in the earliest hours of the new world order after the Resurrection, the two disciples do not recognize Jesus. Their eyes are “prevented” from seeing, an expression for spiritual blindness. It is ironic that the two travelers consider themselves the truly knowledgeable ones and so are shocked that this fellow traveler has no idea of the very public events of the last three days. While they understand the details of the events from a human perspective, they are truly unaware of those events’ meaning.

The passive “prevented” (*ekratounto*) raises the question, who or what kept them from recognizing Jesus? Most often the answer lies within our own fast-held preconceptions which blind us to the real

Jesus. Perhaps it is a divine passive, i.e., where God keeps them from seeing Jesus – if so, then God created the situation where Jesus could explain scriptures to them. Perhaps it is both.

Tannehill (*The Narrative Unity of Luke/Acts*, 282) combines the divine and human sources of “blindness” when he writes: “God holds human eyes in the sense that God’s ways necessarily appear meaningless to humans who understand events in terms of their own purposes and ways of achieving them. A new vision of how God works salvation in the world must be granted to the disciples before a crucified and risen Messiah can be meaningful for them.”

God may use our inadequate or narrow understandings to blind us so that God might give us a new vision of God’s ways in the world with its related understanding of scripture. Remember that Saul was a very devout and committed believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before he was blinded by the light of Jesus. Could his deeply held, devout Jewish beliefs have kept him from seeing the risen Jesus before? If so, what might that imply about us? Whatever deeply held beliefs that we have, we, perhaps, should take less seriously; and recognize that our faith comes as a gift that we can only humbly accept, not proudly claim.

A stumbling block

So far in this account it is the two disciples who are recounting the details of all the *things that have taken place there in these days?* (v.18) The disciples are distressed by the death of Jesus and cannot believe that the event that has shaken their world is not known by another pilgrim.

Cleopas is named, but not the other; perhaps because Cleopas later exercised an important role in the Christian community. The travelers describe Jesus as a mighty prophet, the long-awaited prophet-like-Moses. They had hoped he would be not only a prophet but the messianic deliverer of Israel: “*a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.*” (v.19)

They add: “*how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him*” emphasizing the role of the leaders in Jesus’ crucifixion (v. 20). In the following verses, the play out the crux of their blindness:

But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.” (Luke 24:21-24)

Even the accounts of the empty tomb did not lead them necessarily to conclude that he had risen, because the resurrection expected by the Jews was the general victory of all the just at the end. It was obvious to them that the end and the establishment of a new order had not come. They did not expect an individual resurrection in the midst of history. It seems that their expectations of the meaning of the Messiah were shattered at death’s door. The Cross had become a stumbling block.

Scripture fulfilled

The two disciples have explained to their fellow traveler (Jesus unrecognized) the cause of their disappointment and discouragement. It is then Jesus again speaks: “*And he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.*” (Luke 24:25-27)

The revelation of reality of Easter begins with the fulfillment of Scriptures – a theme emphasized in the beginning of Luke’s gospel: “*investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the*

teachings you have received.” (Luke 1:3-4) Those who do not see the patterns of this fulfillment are “foolish” and “slow of heart to believe.” Jesus brings the sad irony to an end and begins the process of revealing himself and the meaning of the resurrection to the disciples through the lens of a suffering Messiah.

Jesus is direct: the suffering of the Messiah was necessary in God’s providential plan for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of sinners. It was necessary that Jesus be about his Father’s business (2:49), and for the kingdom of God to be preached (4:43). It was necessary to set the crippled woman free from her bondage (13:16) and for Jesus to stay with Zacchaeus (19:5). Above all, it was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem (13:33) and there to suffer and die (9:22; 17:25). It was necessary that the Scriptures be fulfilled in Jesus (22:37; 24:44).

The fulfillment, however, consisted not only in Jesus’ suffering but also in his entering “into his glory” (v. 26). The language of entering into his glory is anticipated by earlier references to Jesus’ “exodus” (9:31), the revelation of Jesus’ glory in the transfiguration (9:32), and the penitent thief’s anticipation of Jesus’ entry into his kingdom (23:42). The glory of the Lord shone at Jesus’ birth (2:9, 14). The Son of Man will come in glory (9:26; 21:27). The disciples had chanted “glory in the highest” while Jesus rode into Jerusalem (19:38). Now, their hopes were being fulfilled even beyond what they knew to hope for.

Just as Luke introduced the conversation on the road to Emmaus with a summary reference to the conversation between the two disciples before Jesus joined them, so also he brings it to a close by shifting from dialogue to a summary of the rest of the conversation. The summary continues the emphasis on the importance of the fulfillment of Scripture in all that had happened. “*Moses and all the prophets*” (cf. 16:29, 31) designates the Scriptures in the context of the two great figures of the OT who appeared at the transfiguration when Jesus’ glory was revealed: Moses and Elijah. Now the risen Lord appears and explains how his suffering and entry into glory fulfilled Moses and the prophets (cf. Acts 17:2-3).

At The Table With Jesus

“As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther.”²⁹ But they urged him, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them.” (Luke 24:28-29)

Alan Culpepper (479) offers an interesting insight into the simple passage (v.28):

Jesus’ first action is probably significant both thematically and theologically. He “walked ahead as if he were going on.” On the surface it is a gesture of social deference and polish. It implies that Jesus was not really going further but that he would not impose on the disciples to offer him hospitality. In Near Eastern customs, the guest was obligated to turn down such an invitation until it was vigorously repeated (see Gen 19:2-3). Theologically, Jesus’ action demonstrates that he never forces himself upon others. Faith must always be a spontaneous, voluntary response to God’s grace. Thematically, the action is suggestive, because all the way through the Gospel Jesus has been going further. When the people at Nazareth rejected him, Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way” (4:30). When the crowds wanted to prevent Jesus from leaving them, he responded, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also” (4:43). He preached in synagogues and withdrew to desert places to pray (4:44; 5:16). In Galilee he was constantly on the move, and from Luke 9:51 until 19:44 he is on the way to Jerusalem. The Lukan Jesus, therefore, was always going further, and in the book of Acts the gospel of Jesus will spread “to the ends of the earth.”

The invitation to share a meal should be a familiar scene to one who has read Luke. The actions recall the pattern of ministry to a household in which Jesus had instructed his disciples (see 10:7, “*Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you*”). Just as earlier Jesus had received hospitality from Zacchaeus (19:5, 9), so also now he accepts the hospitality of the two with whom he had traveled. What is unusual here is that the guest becomes the host. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. The four verbs are Jesus' signature, which the disciples (or at least the readers) may remember from the feeding of the five thousand (9:16) and the last supper (22:19). Brian Stoffregen offers a comparison of these three events:

	Emmaus 24:30	Last Supper 22:19	Feeding 9:16
taking	<i>labon</i>	<i>labon</i>	<i>labon de</i>
the bread	<i>ton arton</i>	<i>ton arton</i>	<i>tous pente artous</i>
blessing	<i>eulogesen</i>	<i>eucharisesas</i>	<i>eulogesen autous</i>
breaking	<i>klasas</i>	<i>eklasen</i>	<i>kataklasen</i>
giving	<i>epedidou</i>	<i>edoken</i>	<i>edidou</i>
to them	<i>autois</i>	<i>autois</i>	<i>tois mathetais</i>

A minimalist reading of the text sees the liturgical language acting only as the catalyst for the recognition of Jesus and falls short of an Eucharistic understanding that emphasizes hospitality and table fellowship as the modality of Christian behavior. But the long understanding of the early church and beyond is that hospitality and fellowship are true, as is the liturgical language, but that it is also a Eucharistic celebration rooted in the recognition of Jesus as Lord and Savior. In this “breaking of the bread” (v.35; an early name for the Eucharist: Acts 2:42, 46) they recognize him; immediately he disappears from their physical sight.

The scene ends with the disciples recalling how their hearts “burned” within them while Jesus was talking with them and interpreting the Scriptures to them. The Emmaus story, therefore, sets before the reader two sorts of responses: One may either be “*slow of heart to believe*” (v. 25) or know the joy of those whose hearts burn within them. The burning hearts were the result of both Jesus’ words and the interpretation of Scripture (see v. 32). Earlier, Jesus had said that he had come to bring fire to the earth (12:49-50); now the fire has been kindled (cf. Jer 20:9; Acts 2:3).

The Community Rejoined and United

The final movement of the Emmaus story returns the two disciples to Jerusalem and serves as a transition to the appearance there. Jerusalem is the focus of Luke’s geographical scheme throughout Luke and Acts. The Gospel begins and ends in Jerusalem, and the journey to Jerusalem dominates the record of Jesus’ ministry. In Acts the mission of the church begins in Jerusalem, and Paul returns there at regular intervals.

The experience of the risen Lord cannot be held in. It must be shared, proclaimed (Acts 4:20). By the time the two travelers return to Jerusalem, the good news is already known. Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter, the leader of the Twelve; this appearance is not described in the Gospels. Luke closes his narration of the story with a reminder for his readers of its special significance for them: recognition came in “the breaking of bread.”

A Final Thought

In his assessment of the resurrection appearances and of the gospel narratives which have preserved these experiences, Bas Van Jersel suggested that these texts were intended not only to inform would-be believers concerning the fact of Jesus-risen but also as an *interpretation* of his resurrection for the life of the disciple. In other words, accounts such as the one recorded in today's gospel help us to understand that faith in the resurrection is not confined to a past event; nor is it relegated solely to a future moment when we also are raised by God from death. Rather, the resurrection appearances represent the church's understanding concerning the *permanent presence* of the risen Lord with us *now*. How and in what manner do we experience him among us? What are the implications of his presence? How must it influence our faith? our life style?

Matthew, in his gospel, told his readers that they would find and experience Jesus in the *hungry* when they fed them; in the *thirsty* when they gave a drink of water; in the *stranger* to whom they gave a welcome; in the *naked* whom they clothed, in the *ill* whom they cared for and in the *prisoner* whom they visited. In another passage, the evangelist assured his contemporaries of an experience of Jesus' presence whenever and wherever two or three would gather together in *prayer* (Matthew 25:35-36, 18:20). For his part, the fourth evangelist offered the assurance of Jesus' abiding presence in the gift of the *Spirit*. Like Jesus, the Spirit would *teach* the disciples, *remind* them of his words and works, *guide* them to the truth and *be with them always* (John 14:16).

In today's gospel, Luke reminds believers that the ultimate encounter with the permanent presence of the risen Jesus comes in the breaking open of the Word and in the Breaking of the Bread which is the Eucharist.

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