

The Road to Emmaus



Christ on the road to Emmaus | Jan Wildens, 1640s | Heritage Museum | St. Petersburg Russia | PD-US

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. (Luke 24:13-35) [Note: On Easter Sunday the noon and evening masses have this gospel from Luke, otherwise the morning gospels are the Johannine resurrection narrative]

Setting the Scene

It is the first Sunday after the events of Jesus’ crucifixion. The women have already discovered the empty tomb and reported it to the Apostles. Peter and John verified that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was indeed empty. Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene. All these passages are part of the story of the Resurrection told in the other gospels. In the Gospel of Luke, we read:

¹ But at daybreak on the first day of the week they took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb;³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.⁴ While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them.⁵ They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. They said to them, “Why do you seek the living one among the dead?⁶ He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee,⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.”⁸ And they remembered his words.⁹ Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others.¹⁰ The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; the others who accompanied them also told this to the apostles,¹¹ but their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them.¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened. (Luke 24:1-8)

No doubt word spread among the apostles and disciples: “he has been raised...but their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them” It is safe to assume that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are among those who consider the report so much wishful thinking.

An Easter walk to Emmaus

Two of the disciples who had been with the Eleven on Sunday morning (v. 9) leave for Emmaus after having heard the report of the women and of Peter. This story, another unique offering of Luke, has pattern similarities with the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip later on: a journey, the interpretation of Scripture, a significant action, and a mysterious disappearance (Acts 8:26–40). In the Greek text, the village of Emmaus is said to be “sixty stadia” from Jerusalem. A *stadion* was about six hundred feet, making the distance around seven miles.

Unable to see

As the two journeyed “...they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.”

Jesus is taken for another pilgrim returning home from the Jerusalem festival. The two disciples do not recognize him. Their eyes are “prevented” an expression for spiritual blindness. Various appearance stories say that Jesus looked “different” (Mark 16:12; John 20:14; 21:4). His body has definitely been transformed by the resurrection, but the point in these descriptions seems to be that it takes faith, a gift of new eyes, to recognize the risen Lord. Readers are helped by knowing that some of Jesus’ friends did eventually recognize him and testified to the reality of his resurrection, but even more by realizing that recognition of the Lord does not depend on his natural visibility.

The passive “prevented” (*ekratounto*) raises the question, “Who or what kept them from recognizing Jesus?” Schweizer (*The Gospel According to Luke*, 373) suggests: “What stands in the way of their faith is their belief in an image of Christ that does not describe Jesus.” Could our expectations of Jesus blind us

to the real Jesus? Could it be a divine passive? Could it be God that kept them from seeing Jesus – if so, then God created the situation where Jesus could explain scriptures to them. 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.

Explaining disappointment

One of the dejected disciples is named Cleopas. We are not given the name of their traveling companion. It is perhaps that Cleopas is remembered as he later exercised an important role in the Christian community.

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: “*Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?*” They describe Jesus as a mighty prophet, the long-awaited prophet-like-Moses (Deut 18:15; Acts 7:22). They had hoped he would be not only a prophet but the messianic deliverer of Israel (see Luke 1:68) but “...*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.*” In the Lukan narrative again there is emphasis on the role of the leaders in Jesus’ crucifixion.

“What is lacking in their interpretation of Jesus’ significance, however, is the understanding that, as God’s prophet, Jesus must fulfill the destiny of the prophets: rejection, suffering, and death. They thus misunderstand the prophetic pattern in the Scriptures that Jesus fulfills. What is more, even though they regard Jesus as a prophet, they have failed to take with appropriate seriousness his prophecies regarding his own suffering, death, and resurrection” (Green, 846-47)

The reference to the third day serves the straight forward purpose of orienting the timeline for this new pilgrim. It may also point to the reason they had departed from Jerusalem - the Passover celebrations were complete, the Sabbath was over, and now they are free to travel. But for the readers, Luke wants to remind them of the predictions of Jesus:

“He strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’” (Luke 9:21-22)

“And taking the twelve, he said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.’ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.” (Luke 18:31-24)

Perhaps they were not part of the entourage when Jesus made his predictions of his Passion and Resurrection. Perhaps this seemed too radical for the ones who heard Jesus to share with others, but in

any case, even the same-day accounts of the empty tomb did not lead the two travelers necessarily to conclude that Jesus had risen. Behind their thinking was the general belief that the resurrection expected by the Jews was the general victory of all the righteous on the “day of the Lord.” It was obvious to them that the end times and the establishment of a new order had not come. An individual resurrection in the midst of history was simply not “on their radar.”

Jesus responds

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.*

Jesus admonished them for their hard hearts. The two have read or heard the prophets all their lives. But on this occasion Jesus “connects the dots” for them to show how their sacred texts were being fulfilled. While they might have thought of the long awaited Messiah as the conquering warrior king, Jesus explains the necessity of suffering and death of the Righteous One of God. The text makes no specific references to the Old Testament passages that Jesus uses, but one can easily imagine that the “Suffering Servant” canticle of Isaiah ([Isa 52:12 to 53:12](#)) was a key reference used. In God’s plan the cross preceded the glory. This will be the pattern repeated for Jesus’ disciples (Acts 14:22).

Jesus “is able to assert that the Scriptures presage the eschatological king who would suffer before entering his glory. In God’s economy, the high status of God’s anointed one is not the antithesis of humility or humiliation. Rather, in his suffering and resurrection, Jesus embodied the fullness of salvation interpreted as status reversal; his death was the center point of the divine-human struggle over how life is to be lived, in humility or self-glorification. Though anointed by God, though righteous before God, though innocent, he is put to death. Rejected by people, he is raised up by God—with both activities subsumed under the one divine purpose.” (Green, 849)

At the Table with Jesus

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?”*

The disciples are struck by what Jesus has said and ask him to *stay* with them. The word “stay” or “abide” here may have richer overtones, as in John’s Gospel (John 14:17; 15:4–10). Jesus shares a meal with them, which is described so as to recall the multiplication of the loaves (9:16) and the Last Supper (22:19). In this “breaking of the bread” (an early name for the Eucharist: Acts 2:42, 46) they recognize him; immediately he disappears from their physical sight.

One should note the similarities of narrative. Luke describes Jesus doing the same actions as before

	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>

Should we assume that these two disciples were at one or both of these events and that they recognized Jesus through these familiar actions? Should we assume that these two disciples were not at either event and that the “breaking of bread” is “eye-opening” all by itself, i.e., the power of the sacramental meal? In any case the readers of Luke would recognize the words and actions from their participation in the Eucharist.

Jesus Now Absent

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?”*

They remember that their hearts were “burning” without their knowing why when he was explaining the Scriptures to them. Now they know that it was his risen presence they were experiencing. Luke’s readers know that the same experience is available in the church in the Eucharist and in the reading of the Scriptures. The experience of the risen Lord cannot be held in. It must be shared, proclaimed (Acts 4:20). By the time they return to Jerusalem, the good news is already known. Jesus has appeared meanwhile 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.”

Jesus appears to the community

If the reality of Jesus’ spiritual presence in the church was emphasized in the preceding narrative, the physical reality of his resurrection body is emphasized here. From the earliest times in the church, there was a danger of docetism, the heretical belief that Jesus was God behind a thin veneer of humanity: thus his suffering was only playacting, and his resurrection was simply a return to a completely spiritual existence with no bodily effect. The Letters of John combated this error (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 7). The present narrative stresses that Jesus’ resurrection body is real. The disciples touch him; the marks of the passion are visible in his hands and feet; he eats with the disciples.

Their panic is not surprising, even though they have already heard about the earlier appearance. They are still excited and tense with the unfamiliarity of it all, and Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. His question to them is rhetorical, a way of introducing the Scriptural instruction that will help them to assimilate the truth of this marvelous event. The Old Testament is referred to in a traditional way by naming its three collections: law, prophets, and psalms (usually “writings”). His words commissioning them as witnesses of his resurrection foreshadow the Acts of the Apostles. The “promise” of the Father is the Holy Spirit who will be given to empower them to fulfill their mission (Acts 1:8).

“Possibility (vv 1–12) thus gives way to probability (vv 13–35), and probability to actuality (vv 36–49) and resolution (vv 50–53)—that is, to fresh understanding and obedience. In this way, Jesus’ followers are indeed prepared to serve as “witnesses of these things” (v 48), and this they will do with the opening of Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts.” (Green, 851)

Notes:

24:13 that very day: this story firmly in with the other happenings on the day of resurrection

seven miles: literally, “sixty stades.” A stade was 607 feet. Some later manuscripts read “160 stades” or more than eighteen miles. The exact location of Emmaus is disputed.

24:14 about all the things that had occurred: Luke does not define the subject of their conversation, but all these things must refer to the stories of the empty tomb and of the angels.

24:16 *their eyes were prevented from recognizing him*: A consistent feature of the resurrection stories is that the risen Jesus was different and initially unrecognizable (Luke 24:37; Mark 16:12; John 20:14; 21:4).

24:18 *Are you the only visitor*: Cleopas' questions presents quite an ironic situation. The two disciples nearly rebuke Jesus for not knowing (*ginosko*) what's been going on in these days. Yet, we know that they are the ones who really don't know (*epiginosko* v. 16 = "recognize") what's going on. Their "lack of seeing" involves more than comprehending the resurrected Jesus among them, but also their understanding of the things that have been going on (vv. 19b-24) and their relationship to scriptures (vv. 25-27)

24:19 *What sort of things*: To Jesus' question What things? they gave an illuminating answer. They saw Jesus as a prophet. Jesus referred to himself as a prophet, but in terms of his rejection at Nazareth (4:24); and his death in Jerusalem (13:33). Jesus stresses the persecution of the prophets, which his followers will also face (6:23). Being a "prophet" for Jesus in Luke means rejection, persecution, and death, which is what happened to Jesus.

For the people, they refer to Jesus as a great prophet after raising the widow's son (7:16) -- a great act of miraculous power. It is likely they expected some great miracle from this prophet for the "redemption of Israel" (v. 21). As Tannehill (*Luke*, 353) writes: "They do not make a connection between Jesus' role as prophet and his violent death." I would also add that they don't make a connection between Jesus' role as redeemer and his violent death.

24:21 *we were hoping*: the main problem expressed by the two disciples is the loss of hope. The imperfect of hope (*elpizomen*) implies that they "were hoping" or "kept hoping" in the past. The crucifixion of Jesus was a loss of hope. The resurrection of Jesus restores hope. He is no longer dead. However, note that just the appearance of the risen Jesus was not enough to restore faith and hope -- they don't even know who he is. Secondly, Jesus' interpretation of scriptures points to a new understand of redemption -- one that involves a suffering Messiah (v. 26). NOTE the irony that suffering is necessary for the Messiah "to enter into his glory". God's ways are often found in their opposites. Tannehill (*The Narrative Unity of Luke/Acts*, 283-4) says: "God's action is perceived especially in those situations and experiences where God's saving purpose surprises, because it is quite contrary to human plans and expectations. These experiences emphasize the continuing tension between divine action and human expectation. These experiences are sufficiently important in the plot to describe the God of Luke-Acts as the God who works by irony. The disciples on the road to Emmaus are about to discover that they are the happy "victims" of the God of irony."

24:22–24. The travelers single out what they have learnt from the women about the empty tomb and the vision of angels. They do not say who went to the tomb to check, but the plural, some of those who were with us, shows that Peter had not been alone. The women's story had been verified, at least as far as the empty tomb went. But these two conclude sadly, him (there is emphasis on this word) they did not see. Apparently those who went to the tomb had hoped to see Jesus; but they did not, and this threw doubt on what the women had said.

24:25 *Oh, how foolish you are!* : Perhaps "foolish" is a trifle strong for *anoētoi*, and 'How dull you are!' may give the sense better . In either case, the words fall short of being a compliment

24:26 *That the Messiah should suffer . . .* : Luke is the only New Testament writer to speak explicitly of a suffering Messiah (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). The idea of a suffering Messiah is not found in the Old Testament or in other Jewish literature prior to the New Testament period, although the idea is hinted at in Mark 8:31-33. See the notes on Matthew 26:63 and 26:67-68.

24:27 *Moses and all the prophets*: formed the starting-point, but Jesus also went on to the things that referred to himself in all the scriptures. The picture we get is of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus in

all its parts. Luke gives no indication of which passages the Lord chose, but he makes it clear that the whole Old Testament was involved. We should perhaps understand this not as the selection of a number of proof-texts, but rather as showing that throughout the Old Testament a consistent divine purpose is worked out, a purpose that in the end meant and must mean the cross. The terribleness of sin is found throughout the Old Testament and so is the deep, deep love of God. In the end this combination made Calvary inevitable. The two had wrong ideas of what the Old Testament taught and thus they had wrong ideas about the cross.

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