

Meeting Jesus on the Road to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-31; Jerry Truex; April 30, 2017

A. Introduction

Today we are meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus (see text in appendix). The point I will try to make is that meeting Jesus, seeing the Risen Christ, moves us out of despair and hopelessness.

But before we meet Jesus on the road in Luke 24, I want to back up and very briefly look at Luke's story of Jesus and how we got to the road to Emmaus.

1. Jesus' campaign

During the early part of the first century, a man named Yeshua (Jesus) walked from village to village throughout Galilee. As he went, he announced that the Kingdom of God had arrived and evil was being defeated through his healing, through his teaching, and through his sharing of food (bread).

The Romans and their puppet rulers, King Herod and the High Priests, were afraid of Jesus and the Jesus movement because Jesus opposed the Romans and the High Priests.

- The Romans imposed excessive taxes, conscripted forced labor, and took away Jewish freedom.
- The Jewish High Priests increased peasant debt, confiscated property through lending schemes, turned the Temple into a money-making operation, and restricted access the Temple and thus access to God.

At the same time, about 92% of the Jewish people were peasants and lived on a subsistence level.

- They barely had enough to eat,
- barely enough shelter,
- barely any hope.

It was a bad time for Jewish peasant and Jesus stood with them over against the oppressive political and religious powers of his time.

2. Jesus' march to Jerusalem

There came a time when Jesus decided to march to Jerusalem to confront the political and religious powers. Jesus was like:

- Martin Luther King, who decided to march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 to protest segregation.
- Mahatma Gandhi, who marched 241 miles to Dandi to protest the British salt tax in 1930.
- Both King and Gandhi were assassinated.

Like King and Gandhi, Yeshua walked from Galilee to Jerusalem to confront the political and religious power brokers, who were oppressing Jewish peasants.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem, he predicted he would be assassinated. He went anyway. Jesus was committed to doing God's business irrespective of the consequences.

When he arrived in Jerusalem (ca. 30), he went straight to the Temple. The Temple was the economic center and religious center of Judaism.

In the middle of the Temple courts, Jesus overturning the money changers tables and drove out the sacrificial animals that were being marketed to the crowd. He declared that the Temple should be a house of prayer for all nations and not exclusively for rich Jews.

This infuriated the Temple priests and the Roman overlords (Pilate). They thought Jesus would start a riot or an out-and-out rebellion. So, the Temple guards arrested him ... and the Romans tortured him ... and finally the Romans crucified him It was Friday.

3. "It was Friday, but Sunday's comin!"

Tony Campolo, who is a famous Christian speaker, talks about being in a "preach off" (competitive preaching among black preachers) in his church in west Philadelphia, which was predominantly black. There were six preachers in a row, and he was the fifth. He preached the best sermon he had ever preached. He was so good, he said he wanted to take note on himself. Then the last preacher stood up.

The last black preacher: "It was Friday, but Sunday's comin'." The black preacher repeated this phrase over-and-over for an hour, adding slight variations.

It was Friday and my Jesus was dead on the cross. But that was Friday. Sunday's comin'!"¹ It was Friday... darkness and despair covered the land... Mary was crying her eyes out... The disciples were hiding behind locked doors ... The cynics were looking at the world, saying, Jesus didn't change a damn thing ... But that was Friday. Sunday's comin'!

The black preachers' point was clear. We need to take our eyes off the hopelessness and despair of our lives (Friday) and we need to focus on the Risen Christ (Sunday).

B. On the road to Emmaus

1. A story of despair

In the scripture we read this morning, Cleopas and his companion (some say his wife), were running away. They were focused on Friday. They were headed home. It is a story of despair.

With the death of Jesus, everything they hoped for collapsed. The power brokers of the world had won. There was no Kingdom of God. Only the Kingdom of Caesar. No messianic banquet; only scraps of bread won through hard labor.

They thought the world would go back to business as usual ... *as if* Jesus had never existed. So, the two disciples were headed home. They decided to return to their jobs and households back in village of Emmaus. They were fools for following a failed messiah. They were focused on Friday.

2. A story of transformation

The story begins with two disciples filled with doubt and disillusionment. But this is also a story of transformation. So

- if you are filled with doubt and disillusionment today,
- if you are feeling overwhelmed by life,
- if you have lost a loved one or your hope for the future,

¹ From a sermon entitled, "It's Friday but Sunday's coming!" as told by Tony Campolo.

Then this story is for you. Listen carefully, because it is a story of transformation from discouragement in the *beginning* to hope at the *end*.²

- In the *beginning* of the story, Cleopas and his companion are headed westward toward Emmaus (v. 13), but by the *end* of the story they go eastward and return to Jerusalem (v 33).
- In the *beginning*, they are grieving over Jesus' death (v 15), but by the *end* they are proclaiming the living Jesus (v 35)
- In the *beginning*, Cleopas and his companion are unable to recognize Jesus (v 16), but by the *end* their eyes are opened (v 31).

We want to address two questions:

- Why didn't they see the Risen Christ at *beginning*?
- What enabled them to see him in the *end*?

C. Why didn't they see Jesus?

1. Stuck in Friday (vv. 14-15)

First — *Why didn't they see Jesus?* — because they're stuck in Friday. Cleopas and his companion are absorbed in the traumatic events of Jesus' death and their miserable situation (v 15). They are focused on their own misery.

In verse 14, the text describes them as *repeating* the same conversation over and over— "they were talking" about what had happened on Friday. It's an iterative imperfect — ὠμίλουν — they were *repeating* themselves over-and-over.

v. 14 - αὐτοὶ ὠμίλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους

In verse 15, the text describes them as not only talking, but also *rehashing* events of Friday [ὁμιλεῖν and συζητεῖν are infinitives of contemporaneous time]. The picture is of two people dwelling on, getting stuck on, Friday, as if time had stopped on horrors and disappointments of Friday.

v. 15 - ἐν τῷ ὁμιλεῖν αὐτοὺς καὶ συζητεῖν

² Luke is telling us a story that happened two thousand years ago, but he has also added his own story-telling spin to it to make certain theological points.

We sense that Cleopas and his friend are talking themselves into more-and-more despair. They are in a downward spiral of depression.

It is right at that moment that a stranger appears on the road. It is Jesus. But their hearts are so full of disappointment, so full of defeat, so devoid of faith, they don't recognize him.

Dwelling on disappointment and wallowing in depression (Friday) prevents us from seeing Jesus (Sunday).

What's more, when this stranger asks what they are talking about, Cleopas' vision is so clouded by his wallowing in bad things that happened on Friday, that he ironically asks the stranger, "Are you the only one who doesn't understand?"

Cleopas' head is so full of Friday, he can't see Jesus even when Jesus is right in front of his nose!

2. Lack faith (vv. 21-22)

Second — *Why didn't they see Jesus?* — because they lack faith. Ironically, they tell the stranger about Jesus of Nazareth, that he was a prophet mighty in deed and word, and they had hoped that he would be the promised Messiah, but he was killed ... Period! End of story.

They even tell the stranger about women finding the empty tomb and having a vision of angels. They know the rumors that Jesus is alive. But they don't believe it.

Cleopas and his friend leave Jerusalem and head home. Why? Because they lack faith. They don't believe that Jesus has risen. They head back to Emmaus to start life over without Jesus.

3. Lack knowledge of Scripture (vv. 25-26)

Third — *Why didn't they see Jesus?* — because they lack knowledge of Scripture. Notice that when the two disciples finished their side of the story, the stranger reprimands them.

In verse 25, the stranger asks them:

v. 25 - Weren't you listening when Jesus told you how all of this must come to pass? Don't you know how the prophets foretold what has just happened, that the Messiah would suffer and die before he enters his glory?"

Next, Jesus teaches the disciples the proper way to read the Old Testament. Right there, Jesus has a Bible study with them.

v. 24 - Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

The OT becomes a grand explanation of what God was doing through the Messiah; for example:

- Psalm 2 talks about the Messiah being rejected and then glorified
- Psalm 16 talks about the resurrection of the Messiah
- Psalm 110 speaks of the Messiah as a king, priest, and judge
- Isaiah 53 reveals that the Messiah will be a suffering servant and redeemer

4. Their eyes were "held back" (v. 16)

Fourth — *Why didn't they see Jesus?* — because their eyes were "held back." The NRSV says, their eyes were "kept from recognizing him" (v 16). But, more literally, the Greek says their eyes were "held back" or "arrested" or "restrained" (ἐκρατοῦντο from κρατέω).

WHAT held their eyes back from seeing?

- It could have been they were stuck in Friday.
- It could have been their lack of faith.
- It could have been their lack of Scripture knowledge.

Whatever it was, their eyes were "held back," imprisoned in the dark.

D. What enabled them to see Jesus?

What eventually enables them to see the Risen Christ?

1. Christ takes the initiative

First — *What enabled them to see Jesus?* — We should note Christ takes the initiative.

The blindness of the disciples does not keep Christ away. He comes to those who are disappointed and in doubt and despair. He comes to those who have given up and are headed home. Do you believe that? Do you believe the Christ comes to you when you are in doubt and despair?

2. Christ opens eyes by opening Scripture

Second — *What enabled them to see Jesus?* — We are told Christ opens their eyes by opening Scripture. Some people think knowing Scripture is unnecessary. This passage tells us otherwise. Studying and knowing Scripture is essential, critical, vital.

In the story, Jesus seems to be angry with them. Why? Because they didn't know Scripture.

v. 25 - Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

Had they known what the prophets taught in Scripture, they would not have gone back to Emmaus. They would have stayed in Jerusalem and they would have recognized Jesus.

Very interestingly, Luke uses the same Greek word (δianoίγω) for the "opening" of Scriptures (v 32) and "opening" of their eyes (v 31).

v. 31 – "their eyes were opened (*dianoigō*)"

v. 32 – "while he opened (*dianoigō*) the Scripture to us"

Luke deliberately links knowing Scripture with seeing or recognizing Christ. If we want to see Jesus in our life, working our world, then we must know Scripture. We are spiritually blind without Scripture.

3. Christ opens eyes by breaking bread

Third — *What enabled them to see Jesus?* — The story tells us that Christ opens their eyes when he breaks bread with them.

Bread represents life. To share bread with someone—particularly a stranger—is to say, “Here, I’m sharing life with you. You are not a stranger anymore.”

In the Middle East, eating together—sitting face-to-face, eating from the same bowl, pulling bread from the same loaf, drinking from the same cup—is an act of intimate sharing among equals.

Sharing bread symbolizes *sharing life together among equals*.

Jesus used table fellowship as a picture of how God includes people. Eating with Jesus became a symbol of God’s love and inclusion, compassion and social healing.

Jesus taught his disciples *to imitate him* in this type of open table fellowship. So, when the two disciples—and *this is important*—shared bread with “the stranger,” they were imitating Jesus.

It is precisely then, *when they are imitating Jesus*, that their eyes are opened. Their joy is returned to them. And go back to Jerusalem to witness to the other disciples.

E. Some conclusions

The story of about meeting Jesus on the Road to Emmaus is a story about spiritual enlightenment. It tells us how to see or recognize Jesus in our lives.

The main point: *Seeing Jesus moves us out of despair and hopelessness.*

First, we cannot see Jesus, if we:

- 1) Get stuck on Friday
- 2) Get stuck in doubt
- 3) Forget to read our Bibles



Eyes “held back” and we
“spiritual blindness”

Second, we see the Risen Christ, if we:

- 1) Look for Christ taking the initiative to reach out to us
- 2) Read and study Scripture
- 3) Imitate Jesus (e.g., breaking bread together)

Appendix: Luke 24:13-31

24:13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 24:14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 24:15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 24:16 but their eyes were kept [lit. "held back"] from recognizing him.

4:17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 24:18 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?"

24:19 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, 24:20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 24:21 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. 24:22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 24:23 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. 24:24 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."

24:25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 24:26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" 24:27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

24:28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 24:29 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. 24:30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 24:31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (NRSV)