

MAKING THE EASTER CONNECTION

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Ken Peterson

Luke 24:1-35

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the South Carolina Department of Social Services sent out the following letter to one of their clients:

“Your food stamps will be stopped effective March 1992 because we have received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.”

Obviously, for some bureaucrat, things weren't making connections. The facts and the meaning of those facts weren't coming together for him.

For Christians, there can be likewise be considerable gaps between the truths we affirm and our practice. Does the way we live our lives verify what we say we believe? It has been said that the journey from the head to the heart is often very long and difficult. Just how do we translate what we know into something that motivates and controls us?

Easter is where this gap seems most obvious to me. Most of us here believe that Christ rose from the dead that first Easter, or we wouldn't bother coming to church today. But, have we really grasped what that means? Does our Christian living vibrate with resurrection power? Is our Christianity more like a dull habit or an exciting adventure? I confess I am disappointed with myself. While at times I know and live in the power of the risen Christ, far too often, my faith is characterized by more deadness than I'd like. But in our Scripture this morning, I find some wonderful helps in connecting head knowledge to the center of our motivation, our hearts. What I need most is the power to live like Christ. I expect you might be thinking that this is your need as well.

The account of these two disciples on the road to Emmaus shows the dramatic transformation of making the connections. At the beginning they are the picture of defeat, hopelessness, and depression. When Jesus asks them what they are talking about, we are told, *They stood still, their faces downcast* (24:17b). Just six words perfectly capture the disappointment, the depression, and the energy sapping quality of their feelings. The story ends with them energized, excited, hurrying the seven miles back to Jerusalem as fast as they could, even through the dark—eager to share the good news. I want us to look at the process of this transformation this morning—how this great Physician of the soul, enables them to grasp the reality and begin living the life it offers.

This is a quiet story. You can feel the reflective nature, the piecing together of things. Here we see the process of making sense of things that seem beyond our comprehension. And, I love the

gentle, subtle approach of Jesus. Nothing is pushed or imposed. The doubts, the struggles of these two disciples are taken seriously— ending with it all coming together for them in revelation that is integrated into their own personalities and experience.

THE JOURNEY

In this story there is a physical geography and a spiritual geography. It is a seven mile journey to the village of Emmaus and a journey from head knowledge to heart knowledge. Here we have two discouraged, disillusioned followers of Jesus presumably returning home. It takes at least two or three hours to walk the seven miles to Emmaus. I picture more of a slow stroll due to their discouragement. It is about the middle of Sunday afternoon, the day Jesus rose from the dead. We are told the name of one, Cleopas, and the name of the other is unknown. However, it could possibly be his wife. John mentions the four women who remained at the cross of Jesus until the end— one is identified as "Mary, the wife of Clopas" (19:25). It is possible this is a variant spelling of the Cleopas here. While it is speculative, it makes sense to think that here we have a husband and wife making their way home after being in Jerusalem for the Passover and spending the last days with Jesus. And, based upon speculation from Jn. 19:25, I'm going to refer to the woman as Mary. Even if it is not the Mary John refers to, Mary is a good guess since there seem to be so many Marys in the gospels— it was a very popular name. Cleopas is perhaps one of the many followers who deserted Jesus and Mary one who remained faithful to the end. Both are true disciples— believers and followers of Jesus. Their pace is slow as with those who have nothing to get home for. Their hopes gone and their future confused and uncertain. You can see their shoulders sagging with discouragement.

As they are walking, Jesus draws alongside of them, *but they were kept from recognizing him*. We'll explore what kept them from recognizing him in just a moment. But first, locate yourself on this road to Emmaus with Emmaus being the place of discovery where our eyes opened and the road being the journey leading to that discovery. I don't believe we're ever completely through with this journey. There is always more to discover and always a greater manifestation of our risen Lord. We've all been on that road, dealing with disappointments, loss, unfulfilled dreams, emptiness, dead ends, and confusion, trying to make sense out of things that have happened.

It is important to be honest with ourselves and God about where we are on that road. Martin Luther's first instruction on prayer is simply, "Don't lie to God." While it seems obvious, it is not so easy. This involves being ourselves, totally open and transparent before God. Often we pray those things we think "we ought to feel and pray." I've made a personal discovery. Whenever my Christian walk becomes superficial; when prayer seems empty, more of a one way conversation; when Scripture is boring, not speaking to me; when worship is routine, marked with little desire or passion— the first place to check is if I'm really being open and honest with God. Generally I find I've taken control again and one of the ways I do that is by wearing a mask of self-sufficiency, pretending things are better than they are, even with God. We can't relate to masks, can we? When we're not real with one another, the relationship becomes superficial and we talk about weather, not real deep issues. The same thing happens with our relating to God.

The first question God asks in the Bible is of Adam and Eve right after they sin. Seeking them, He asks, "Where are you?" And still, He is ever seeking us in Christ, and it is still his basic first question, "Where are you?" We are on the road to Emmaus and Jesus draws alongside. The honesty of Cleopas and Mary precipitates a life-transforming discovery.

Remember, a sense of need is in itself a wonderful gift. Jesus launches his teaching ministry with the beatitudes, which I've just concluded a series of sermons on. Most of the beatitudes speak to basic needs. Listen to the first two from The Message:

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.

With less of you, there is more of God and His rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.

Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. (Mtt. 5:3-4)

That's where Mary and Cleopas seem to be. In those times, remember, Jesus comes to us— He seeks us out. He comes to those who have given up and headed back home. He comes to those who are wrestling with doubts. He comes to the disconsolate.

KEPT FROM RECOGNIZING HIM

...But they were kept from recognizing him (16). This is a curious phrase. I used to think it was some supernatural act of God, so they wouldn't recognize Jesus. But I don't think so any more. Too often, I fail to recognize Jesus at first as he draws along side me on my journey. And, the things that keep me from recognizing Him I see at play here.

First, these disciples, as we all do, had a bias— a world view, a set of lenses through which they viewed their world that kept them from seeing some of what was really there. That can prevent us from making the right connections to what it really means.

I've read that Lt. Joseph C. Ives who was with the Corps of Topographical Engineers in 1861 who were among the first white men who ever visited the Grand Canyon wrote:

“[It] is, of course, altogether valueless... Ours has been the first and will doubtless be the last party of whites to visit this profitless locality.”

I think we'd say he missed something of the potential and significance of it. Maybe he was looking at it through the eyes of a farmer! Well, at the end of May, Polly and I are going to take a week's vacation to visit that “profitless locality.” We've never been there, and it is one of Polly's dreams to see it.

Poor Cleopas and Mary had known Jesus' ministry. They had thrilled to the vision of the Kingdom of God, His teaching, His mighty works, and their faith had soared in the power of God. They saw the momentum gaining, culminating in that triumphal entry into Jerusalem just one week ago. Then, suddenly everything began to quickly unravel. Jesus, who'd kept the jealous religious leaders at bay, making them look silly in their attempts to trap him, was suddenly taken and was seemingly powerless in their evil hands. Mary at least had been there right to the end and had seen Jesus' brutally mangled body hanging from the cross. Can we blame them for not recognizing Jesus? Resurrection was way beyond anything they could imagine. How could they guess God would work in that way?

Cleopas and Mary had most of the facts about Easter right. Listen to what they affirm. They know of the women's early visit to the tomb finding it empty and that angels proclaimed that Christ is risen. And they know of Peter and John's early morning run to verify the fact that the tomb was empty. But what should be good news was just more bad news to them. Everything the last few days had been a disaster with the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. This caused them to edit some of the facts. They don't mention Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene—perhaps thinking that it is just too far-fetched—a product of hysteria or an overactive imagination. And, the actual appearance of angels now in their retelling is “a vision of angels.”

With us, we are ever in danger of letting our preconceptions and paradigms cause us to miss a current work of God. How open are we to the way He may be using the current disaster, the present trouble or the change we face to lead to something better than we can imagine? How open are we to the people, the things, or the circumstances He may use as a means to that end?

Secondly, we can imagine the pain and disappointment Mary and Cleopas have been through also distorts their vision. It certainly does for us. In their, *we had hoped...* (21), you detect their fear of hoping again. They are puzzling over how things could have gone so wrong— or had they somehow been deceived? Their defenses are up. They don't want to be taken in again. Can't you identify with that? Haven't we all been disappointed with God at times? Maybe it has been prayers that seem to have gone unanswered or some other way you were trusting God for help. When things seem to fall apart on us anyway even when we are thinking we're doing what God wants, it can make us a little gun-shy in trusting again, can't it?

Jesus encourages them to talk-out their feelings— the pain, disappointment, confusion, and grief. Jesus doesn't discount their feelings, saying, "You shouldn't feel that way..." His listening models good grief therapy for us, helping them move through their feelings to see, and embrace what God is doing in the present. Jesus' careful, patient listening enables them to move beyond their disappointed expectations.

Now, let's look at how that gap between head knowledge and heart belief is bridged. I see three parts to this process illustrated here.

BRIDGING THE GAP

First, Jesus himself is present, though unrecognized. It is true for believers today. The Holy Spirit is also properly referred to as "the Spirit of Jesus" in Scripture. The Holy Spirit is necessary for us to understand, to integrate the truth about God into our lives. And, we have the Holy Spirit within when we invite Jesus into our lives to be our Lord and Savior.

Sometimes His presence is made more real through other believers. Jesus promised, *For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them* (Matt 18:20). With Cleopas and Mary, we have the two. I'm sure many of you have experienced this, as I have. As other believers share their experience with the Lord, you feel the energy, the joy, the passion, the love begin to rekindle your heart. Maybe your heart had been at best lukewarm that day. But in the fellowship, your heart too begins to glow with God's love. Don't isolate yourself when you are

discouraged or have spiritually grown cold. Be in fellowship with other Christians. More often than not, you'll find that's one of the initial means God uses to begin restoring your heart.

Second, notice Jesus uses Scripture as the cornerstone in bringing them to passionate faith.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (27) There is one central message in the Bible from beginning to end: God's rescue operation, saving humanity from its mess through Jesus Christ. Later, Mary and Cleopas describe this seminar with Jesus, "*Didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*" (32). In the presence of Jesus, Scripture comes alive. It is powerful, life-shaping and warms our cold hearts to the ignition point so they begin to burn with passion and excitement. But it was a subtle, gradual dawning of truth—worked in and through their problems, fears, anxieties, and uncertainties. It is a model of devotional practice, attentively listening to God's Word made alive through the Holy Spirit, seeping into the deeper parts of our lives. It is no longer "truth out there" but truth personally, transformingly applied. It is so gradual and subtle that they only recognize it in hindsight. That is often the way it is with our gentle Lord— afterwards, we see how He was there all along, but we just didn't recognize Him.

A few weeks ago, at that wonderful production of Annie, Jr. the actor who was supposed to play Daddy Warbucks got sick at the last minute. Lorrie Fraley-Wilson (who I believe was the director of the show) stepped in at the last minute to play the part. She explained at the beginning she was going to have the lines fed to her through a small receiver in her ear, so she wanted all electronic devices turned off in the auditorium lest it interfere with her reception. It seemed to work quite well.

Later, I thought, this is a metaphor of how God wants us to live. As we go through our days, one ear should be tuned-in to Jesus through the Holy Spirit, giving us the "interpretation" of the current events. The basic script off stage is God's Word to us in the Bible. But it needs to be made alive and applied through Jesus, the Living Word.

These two disciples and the unrecognized Jesus have now arrived at Emmaus, the disciple's home. Now the ball is in their court. Here's where we see the **third**, essential part. Jesus never forces his way in. He has done what he could with Cleopas and Mary.

Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. (28-29)

I rather like the poetic phrasing of the invitation in the King James Version, *Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent*, perhaps because of the hymn, "Abide With Me." Suddenly, Jesus is no longer the guest, but the host. He takes the bread, gives thanks to God and breaks it apart to give to them. Suddenly, everything comes together in that divine, "Aha" or "Yes! Now we get it!" The link of this scene to communion was obvious to the early church. And, it reminds us that in this sacrament is another means by which we realize the Lord's presence. With the recognition, Jesus disappears from their sight.

Now, energized and their passion restored, Cleopas and Mary can't wait to get back to Jerusalem

and report to the apostles. It made no difference that it was getting dark. Their soul and body weariness was gone. Suddenly they are full of excitement and vigor—bursting with Good News. I picture them running a little, then walking, then running again back the seven miles they'd just traveled. The gap is bridged. The risen Christ is not just an idea but a life-changing reality.

CONCLUSION

I remember a phone call I received a number of years ago from a young woman whom I had never met, I'll call Lilly, saying she thought she needed to talk to a pastor. I have no idea why I was called. She was of a different church background. It was a bleak, dreary, winter afternoon when I arrived at a rather dumpy looking rental. The facts Lilly shared were pretty overwhelming. She had a toddler and was six months pregnant. Her husband had just confessed to an affair with someone at work and wanted to end the marriage, saying he no longer loved her. And, no, he wouldn't consider counseling. He used marijuana and alcohol quite liberally. Lilly said she was 1500 miles from her family—lonely, frightened, not knowing where to turn. She'd grown up in a solidly Christian home and knew the truths of the faith well, though she admitted she hadn't been living by them. It seemed a relationship with Jesus never had become personal, or if it had, she had drifted away from it. Mostly what I shared with her that afternoon were the steps we see in the Emmaus story, bringing Cleopas and Mary to resurrection living. She recommitted her life to Christ and I encouraged her to spend time with Jesus, letting His truth seep in, saturating her mind and perspective, and then to continue to surrender everything to Him, obeying Him in her daily walk no matter what. Yes, a walk to Emmaus. I told her it was important to focus upon getting her relationship with Jesus alive and growing—letting Him guide her through this perilous time. I warned her that there were no guarantees on the outcome of the marriage, but I gave her a promise based upon God's Word— if she would whole-heartedly handle this God's way, her life would be marked with vigorous soul-health, peace, security, and joy in the Lord, no matter what happened with the marriage. Later I dropped off a couple of books to help her with this “letting go” process.

I remember as I left that day feeling overwhelmed with the hopelessness of the situation. I was praying, “Oh God, while I think I said what I should, can it *really* work here? Is it enough?” Yet, Lilly did begin to cling to God. She struggled a long time with relinquishing her life and her marriage. She struggled with forgiveness and letting go of anger and bitterness. But she kept at it and dug in spiritually, showing up in church every Sunday. A couple of years later, her husband began showing up in church. The truth of the gospel began to penetrate his cynicism and doubt. Then he too embraced Christ as his Lord and Savior. Today I can't imagine a finer Christian home. She and her husband are passionate in their love of Christ, serving Him energetically. He became quite an evangelist, leading others to Christ. But, it all started one afternoon as Lilly began her walk to Emmaus with the risen Christ.

Where are you this morning on this road to Emmaus? Maybe you've felt your heart stirred and a few embers are beginning to glow. For some there is a hint of direction. The next move is now yours. Will you invite Jesus in? Will you say with Cleopas and Mary, “Abide with me, Lord?”