

Emmaus - From Broken Dreams to Restored Reality

Acts 2:14, 22-33
1 Peter 1:17-21
Psalm 16

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognising him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 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?" 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This passage starts off with 2 people walking along a road, probably some hours after reports had started circulating among the disciples that Jesus had been seen. Historians tell us that it is most likely that the 2 people were a couple. We know one of their names, Cleopas, and the other one was probably his wife, Mary. Now, to understand this passage we need to put ourselves in their shoes; we need to imagine where they were at in their mental and emotional state. And to do that we need to go back to look at the mindset of a 1st century Jew. You see, as they were walking along the road there, they were in a state of complete disillusionment. Firstly they had been completely perplexed by the fact Jesus had died. The Messiah was not supposed to die, and I'll talk more about that in a moment. On top of that some women in their group said they went to his tomb that morning and found it empty and had seen angels who said he was risen. And then, this stranger comes up to them and starts talking like he's just come down in the last shower, with seemingly no idea of what has been happening over the last few days.

These 2 people on the road were like we often are. They had been looking at things the wrong way around. Their understanding of Jesus and who he was and what he was about had gone over their heads, even though they had been with Jesus for 3 years and he had explained to them more than a few times what would happen to him.

You see, as Jews, their understanding of the Messiah was of one who would defeat the powers that be, not be defeated by them and end up on a Roman cross. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. After all the promises, all the miracles they had clearly seen him do, after all he had done and had said to them, he was now just another failed Messiah, one more in the line of hundreds of others who claimed that status in 1st Century Palestine. Even though Jesus had explained to them that he must suffer in fulfilment of the Scriptures, they didn't get it. They had it all wrong.

And then they have to deal with the news that he was apparently alive again. And if they were perplexed before hand, they were even more rattled when they heard this, because once again, the idea that Jesus could be alive now had never occurred to them. All through their history, the Jewish people had had a belief in the resurrection and that the Messiah would be raised along with his people, when

he would lead them in victory at the end of the world. But they had no conception that the Messiah would be raised first, just days after his death, again, even though Jesus had said this to them a number of times. They had been brought up in a certain tradition and their mindset didn't accept it. Their people had had hundreds of years of teaching that said that resurrection would happen only at the end of all things.

The Christian philosopher William Lane Craig says,

“In the Old Testament, the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead on the day of judgment is mentioned in three places (Ezekiel 37; Isaiah 26, 19, Daniel 12.2). During the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the belief in resurrection flowered and is often mentioned in the Jewish literature of that period. In Jesus' day the Jewish party of the Pharisees held to belief in resurrection, and Jesus sided with them on this score in opposition to the party of the Sadducees. So the idea of resurrection was itself nothing new.

But the Jewish conception of resurrection differed in two important, fundamental respects from Jesus' resurrection. In Jewish thought the resurrection always (1) occurred after the end of the world, not within history, and (2) concerned all the people, not just an isolated individual. In contradistinction to this, Jesus' resurrection was both within history and of one individual person.”

So, you can see why their heads were all messed up. First they find out that the Messiah is dead, and now they have to deal with the story that this Messiah is alive now. And Luke who is telling this story in his gospel, is I believe ever the master of understatement when he simply describes them as being sad.

But then the stranger appears alongside them and starts talking with them. And after they tell him about their confusion and despair, he tells them how foolish they are and proceeds to tell them the story in its proper context. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (24:27). He tells them that this was God's plan all along, and that this Messiah is the fulfilment of everything that had been written. Everything points to him. He is the one to whom the Old Testament points as being the one in which salvation is finally achieved. As NT Wright says “Cleopas's puzzled statement only needs the slightest twist to turn it into a joyful statement of early Christian faith: ‘They crucified him - but we had hoped he would redeem Israel’ would shortly become ‘They crucified him - and that was how he *did* redeem Israel.’”

Wright goes on to say that, again, they had been reading the scriptures the wrong way around. They were seeing it as the story of how God would redeem Israel from suffering when it was always about how God would redeem Israel and ultimately the world, *through* suffering - the suffering of Jesus.

And as Jesus is telling them all this as they walk along the Emmaus road, it slowly dawns on them. They have what Fuzz Kitto calls one of those a-ha moments. N.T Wright explains it like this:

“It had been, a matter of telling, and living, the wrong story—or, at least the right story in the wrong way. But now, suddenly, with the right story in their head and Hearts, a new possibility—huge, astonishing, and breathtaking—started to emerge before them. Suppose the reason the key would not fit the lock was that they were trying the wrong door? Suppose Jesus' execution was not the clear disproof of his messianic vocation but [instead] its confirmation and climax? Suppose the cross was not one more example of the triumph of paganism over God's people but was actually God's means of defeating evil once and for all? Suppose this was, after all, ...how sins were to be forgiven and how the kingdom was to come? Suppose this was what God's light and truth looked like, coming unexpectedly to lead his people back into his presence?

Then as he broke bread with them back at their house, they recognised him. As the truth began to penetrate their hearts, they said “Were not our hearts burning within us when he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us” (24:32). And then they rush back to tell the others, who also have their own stories. He has risen indeed! He has appeared to Simon (24:34)!

Wright goes on to say that “Notice what has happened. Their prayer has been answered. Their longing has been satisfied...God’s light and truth have led them back, and their sorrow has been turned into praise.

This was victory in defeat. This was the paradox of God, the upside down kingdom at work. This was God at work in a way that was totally opposite to the ways that we know and believe in.

It is in the breaking of bread that the 2 disciples finally recognise him. When Jesus broke bread with them, it was the first meal of the new creation if you like. The first meal after Jesus had risen, new body and all, our prototype if you like of what will happen at our resurrection. Look at the parallel between this and the story of the first meal in Genesis, right back at the beginning. When Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate it, it says “the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked. Wright says that this story was ‘told over and over, as the beginning of the woes that had come upon the human race. All through the story of Israel in the Old Testament, death was traced back to that moment of rebellion in the garden. The whole creation was subjected to decay, futility and sorrow.

Now though, in this first meal of the new creation, it says that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. And again, just like in Genesis, *the eyes of both of them were opened*, and they recognised him. Things had come full circle. The curse had been broken, and it is Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection that has done it. Wright says “Death itself had finally been defeated and God’s new creation, brimming with life and joy and new possibility, had invaded the world of decay and sorrow.” Things would never be the same again.

It was then no wonder that the disciples would be changed from timid cowards hiding behind locked doors after their leader was executed, to men and women of the most incredible courage who would turn the Roman Empire upside down. 2,000 years later, no one has come up with a more plausible explanation for the sudden explosion in the Christian movement than the explanation that it was because of the actual physical resurrection of Jesus in history and what it did to the early believers. They had the unshakeable conviction that something world-changing had happened. They knew that not even death could now defeat them. Not even the mighty power of Rome would dent their courage. This was why they could say with full conviction that Jesus was Lord and therefore by implication, Caesar was not, and this was why they could say that without fear of the consequences that they knew would follow - horrible death by being fed to hungry lions or being crucified or through various other completely inhumane methods. They were a people completely transformed by the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

This is why any explanation of Jesus that tries to describe him as anything less than the son of God himself is hopelessly inadequate and just doesn’t fit with what we see in the gospel stories, not to mention the history books that tell us of the rise of the Christian movement against all the odds.

As their eyes were opened, their deepest longings were satisfied. Their hearts were burning within them. Beforehand we sang “Only you can fill my deepest longing, only you can breathe in me new life.”

Their hearts were burning within them as he spoke to them, as it slowly dawned on them that what

had happened over those last few days was actually just how it was supposed to be. It all made sense now. Jesus really was the fulfilment of all that their scriptures had said. God had acted in history, he had played his part, and he had come through, although not in the way they had expected. But isn't that how God always works? He never works in the way we expect. If we have it set in our hearts that God will work in a certain way, then for a start we are being arrogant, and secondly, we are setting ourselves up for disillusionment. It can actually affect our faith in God if we believe that God will act in a certain way. Who are we to say how God is going to act? We know that he will always act in love, but we don't always know how that's going to play out in any given situation.

"Only you can fill my deepest longing, only you can breathe in me new life. Only you, can fill my heart with laughter, only you, can answer my heart's cry". This is the hope of the resurrection. Jesus is the only one who can answer the cry of the human heart for longing and belonging, for meaning and for purpose. It has been said that coming to Christ is a finding of what was once lost, it's like a coming home, when you realise that this was what you've been looking for your whole life. I remember when I was 19 and I had been a Christian for a few years. Around that time I had what I can only call a conversion experience. It was a time when God was more real to me than he had ever been, and I was sick of my own self-pity. I was sick of my own timidity. I remember reading passages in the gospels which told me that when you ask you *will* receive, that when you seek you *will* find, and that when you knock, the door *will* be opened to you. And I read that you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. That was real to me back then. And it suddenly hit me too that this was what I had been looking for all my life.

Leo Tolstoy said that "the human soul is Christian in its nature [and that] Christianity is always accepted by man as a remembrance of something forgotten." Deep down we know that life works best when we live by love. But in the pressures and distractions of our lives, we easily forget that. We forget that we have an inbuilt sense of justice, we forget that we have an inbuilt need for relationship, we forget that we have an inbuilt appreciation of beauty, and we forget that we have an inbuilt sense of spirituality.

Blaise Pascal, another great thinker, in the 17th century, said that we all have a God-shaped hole within us, and we are forever restless until we find our hope in him. In our world we try to fill that hole with all sorts of things. We try to fill it with money, and we find that the promises of security only make us more insecure because the more stuff we have the more scared we are that someone is going to take it; we try to fill it with sex, and we find that we feel more lonely and disconnected than ever; and we try to fill it with our own ego and an exaggerated sense of our own importance, and we find that in the process we exclude others and feel apart from instead of a part of.

"Only you can fill my deepest longing, only you can breathe in me new life. Only you can fill my heart with laughter. Only you can answer my heart's cry". This is what the 2 on the road to Emmaus realised that day as Jesus walked along with them. Again, as we sang before, all along my pilgrim journey, I want Jesus to walk with me, because nothing else can ever satisfy that human longing in our hearts. Amen.

by Nils von Kalm
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