



OPEN OUR EYES, LORD!

SERIES: SEASONAL MESSAGES

Luke 24:13-35

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When Dr. Luke set out to write his gospel, he explained to his friend Theophilus that he had a specific purpose in mind. In the preface he writes, “I decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4 NIV). When we come to the climax of Luke’s gospel, it is hard for us to imagine how difficult it must have been for the disciples “to know for certain” that Jesus had been raised from dead, given the overwhelming shock and horror of his execution. Even though the women of Galilee had discovered that the tomb was empty and the angels had appeared to them announcing that Jesus was alive, their witness could not overcome the apostles’ despair. Sadly, the apostles dismissed them as being delirious and refused to believe.

In our text today we find that two of the disciples had lost all hope and had taken their leave of the eleven, setting out on the road to their home in Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem. “The couple may well have been husband and wife, Cleopas and Mary (John 19:25; ‘Clopas’ there is probably the same person as Cleopas here).”¹ Mary was Jesus’ aunt and was among the women who courageously stood with Jesus at the cross. Sometimes life is so painful, we can’t remain in the place of sorrow and so we choose to walk away. I’m reminded of chorus of “Dead Man’s Rope” written by Sting in 2003.

Walk away in emptiness, walk away in sorrow
Walk away from yesterday, walk away tomorrow
Walk away in anger, walk away in pain
Walk away from life itself, walk into the rain

So how does God transform death and despair into the certainty of life? How did those first disciples come “to know for certain” that Jesus was raised from the dead? From the Biblical point of view, such knowledge only arises from a personal encounter. In his article on “*epiginōskō*” E. D. Schmitz observes,

While the Greeks were concerned with detached knowledge and a speculative interest in the metaphysical nature of things, the Old Testament regards knowledge as something which continually arises from personal encounter.²

On a historical level we will see how Jesus’ encounter with the disciples transformed their “sad” and devastated hearts into hearts that “burned” with such love and zeal that they became flaming witnesses to the ends of the earth. On a personal level the story is a model of our transformation. As we begin our journey of faith, the promises of Scripture fan the flame of our expectations and give us high hopes for a bright future. But for many of us, it doesn’t take long before reality “tears our hopes apart,” and “kills the dream we dreamed” (Fantine, *Les Misérables*).

Like the disciples, we become disillusioned and despondent, unable to recognize Jesus at work in our world. What we need is the Spirit of Jesus to open our eyes and to give us a new lens to unlock

the mysteries of life found in Scripture that will set our hearts aflame with the love and light of God’s presence. James encourages us with the promise, “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you” (Jas 4:8). As I’ve been meditating on this story, I asked myself “What were the conditions that made such an encounter possible? What frame of mind and heart do we need to cultivate that allows God to draw near?”

1. “Walking away” to get perspective

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. (Luke 24:13-17 ESV)

The first thing to notice is that walking away in sorrow didn’t prevent them from having an encounter with the Lord. As David wrote in Psalm 139 they discovered that there is no place one can flee from God’s presence.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast. (Ps 139:7-10 NIV)

Often “getting away” puts us in a place where we are able to embrace new perspectives, and the very act of walking with its slow but deliberate pace can enhance our thinking processes.

2. Articulating the tensions of our faith

Secondly, though their dreams were shattered, Cleopas and Mary didn’t cave in to silent resignation. Instead, as they walked home they engaged in a rigorous dialogue with one another, trying to make sense of what had happened. Like all devout Jews, they had great expectations from the prophetic Scriptures and were anxiously waiting a New Exodus that would liberate Israel from pagan domination. They would be free to serve and worship God in peace and holiness. As they witnessed Jesus’ mighty deeds and words, there was no doubt in their minds that he was a prophet. More than that, it seemed as if all the signs pointed to the fact that he might even be the Messiah. Their hopes, however, were crushed when the Romans crucified him, just like every other failed Messiah. How do they make sense of all this? Were the prophets wrong? Had Jesus somehow failed? Did God abandon his Messiah? How do you continue believing in a world gone mad, where might makes right?

Suddenly in the midst of their discussion a stranger appears, whose question stops them in their tracks. “What is this conversation that you are exchanging with each other as you walk?” The verb Jesus uses to describe their discussion (*antiballō* – “to exchange, discuss, implying conflicting opinions”) suggests they had conflicting opinions and were arguing with each other. Death often impacts people’s faith differently, so it’s not difficult to imagine a husband and wife having differing points of view. Was Cleopas angry with God and was his departure from the eleven a sign that he was ready to abandon his faith? If nothing else it shows the community of faith is beginning to break apart. Was Mary, on the other hand, still mesmerized by the words Jesus spoke from the cross, “Father forgive them” and “today you shall be with me in paradise”? Did she, unlike her husband, believe the testimony of the women and want to remain in Jerusalem with the eleven? Is she now upset at having to return home? We can’t know for sure, but what we do know is that they both were being honest about their grief and giving full voice to the tensions of their faith, something the Bible calls “lament.” And whenever we do that God draws near.

It may surprise you, or maybe not, but in my experience, I have never seen lament fail. Whenever we thoughtfully pour out all the dissonance and “pain-drenched thoughts and emotions that fester in the deepest recesses of our soul when God doesn’t come through for us in the way we believe he is supposed to”³ the Lord draws near in a personal encounter. To keep Israel’s hopes alive during their torturous exile, the prophet Isaiah left Israel’s exiles with this wondrous promise:

And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isa 30:20-21)

3. Being vulnerable to welcome a stranger

Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” (vv. 18-21a)

The third thing to notice is that even though they are overwhelmed with disappointment and grief, they are able to welcome a stranger into their midst. Though they are surprised that he seems to be the only one not in the know, they are not suspicious or defensive. Instead his willingness to engage them with a question brought all their longings to the surface, and they pour out their grief to one who, at the least, could ridicule their naïve faith, or at worst, be a spy and turn them over to the authorities. And they hold nothing back about where their loyalties lie.

“Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even 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 him they did not see.” (vv. 21b-24)

There must have been something about this stranger that made them feel so safe that they not only expose their grief, but also invite him to share in their perplexity over the mysterious events that happened on the third day—the report of an empty tomb, angelic visions, and the rumor that Jesus was alive. You doesn’t risk being vulnerable unless you believe the one with whom you are speaking can offer comfort, either in terms of understanding, or least empathy. That gesture of hospitality honors the one listening and opens the door to recognition. Helen Cepero writes in her book *Christ-Shaped Character* gives a word about compassionate hospitality.

There is a saying which reminds us that “the will of God is other people.” Other people can be a doorway to God’s presence as surely as prayer can be a doorway to speak and listen to Jesus Christ. Sometimes Christ’s Spirit will enter despite our locked doors, but more often Jesus waits for us to open the door and let him in. We can provide hospitality for the encounter waiting at our own doorway to receive the other, or we can keep that door resolutely closed out of fear.⁴

4. Willing to listen and to receive a new way of “seeing”

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (vv. 25-27)

Once he is invited into their confidence, the stranger becomes their teacher and comforter. Jesus first addresses their lack of understanding, explaining that their inability to reconcile God’s promises with reality of the days’ events was not an intellectual issue but a moral one. Like Israel of old, they were reluctant (“slow of heart”) to believe all the prophets had spoken, and therefore had failed to orient themselves fully around Jesus’ teaching. It is a strong rebuke, but one that is necessary for us to hear as well. And to their credit, Cleopas and his wife are humble and respectful enough to listen to the stranger, and what he says goes right to their hearts.

Jesus’ rebuke is followed by an act of extreme kindness and grace. He gives them “new eyes” and a “new heart” to understand the Scriptures.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (v. 27)

As N. T. Wright explains,

They, like everybody else in Israel, had been reading the bible through the wrong end of the telescope. They had been seeing it as the long story of how God would redeem Israel from suffering, but it was instead the story of how God would redeem Israel through suffering; through, in particular, the suffering which would be taken on himself by Israel’s representative, the Messiah. When Luke says that Jesus interpreted to them all the things about himself, throughout the Bible, he doesn’t mean that Jesus collected a few isolated texts, verse chosen at random. He means that the whole story, from Genesis to Chronicles pointed forwards to a fulfillment which could only be found when God’s anointed took Israel’s suffering, and hence the world’s suffering, on to himself, died under its weight, and rose again as the beginning of God’s

new creation, God's new people. This is what had to happen; and now it just had.⁵

What would Jesus' word be to us? Would he rebuke us for being "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken?" Have we been too selective in what we believe in the Scriptures so that we are unable to see God in our present pain or experience? Or might our condition be worse, in that we have been "slow of heart to read anything the prophets have spoken!" It's been my observation over the last forty years that the more access to Scripture and study tools we have acquired through technology, the lazier and more illiterate we have become in regard to the Scriptures. It is such a sad irony to me that we live among the most educated people in the world, and yet we have very little command of the Scriptures. For God to draw near to us, we must draw near to him, which at the very least means reading and meditating on the Scriptures, the whole of Scripture, so that we see Jesus' story as the climax to Israel's story and Creation's story, a story which doesn't hint but shouts, that the only way to glory is through suffering and a cross.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a well-known professor of philosophy at Calvin College, lost his twenty-five year old son Eric, who died in a mountain climbing accident in Austria. Wolterstorff struggled and questioned God about this tragedy that would forever change his life. The comfort he found was not in "overcoming" the death of his son, but in his lament for his boy he began to glimpse the suffering of God with him.

For a long time I knew that God is not the impassive, unresponsive, unchanging being portrayed by the classical theologians. I knew of God's response of delight and of his response of displeasure. But strangely, his suffering I never saw before. God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of the humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.

It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend of mine said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor.

And great mystery: to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil. Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it. But I never saw it.⁶

5. Open eyes and burning hearts

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (vv. 28-32)

Our story opened with our couple engaged in an animated discussion on the way to Emmaus, and Jesus took the initiative to "draw near" to them, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." It concludes with the couple taking the initiative to "draw near" to Jesus by compelling him to accept their gift of hospitality.

At the table he takes on the role of host, and as he takes the bread and blesses it, their "eyes were opened and they recognized him."

Consider how sad it would have been had Cleopas and his wife not taken the initiative to prevail upon Jesus with their hospitality, or if they had been too polite or shy, not wanting to impose their desires on their teacher. They would have missed the pearl of great price and the ultimate treasure of this holy feast. I like to say, "Life begins when the meetings are over." Drawing near to God and creating space for him to draw near to you, takes initiative, determination and time, a lot of time.

How much time, you ask? Well Cleopas and his wife had had already spent the better part a day walking together with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. And throughout the day Jesus had been tutoring them through major portions of Hebrew Scriptures through a new lens of understanding. Isn't that enough? Not when your hearts have been set aflame with a newfound love and zeal that has made your whole world new. God wants to give us the desires of our hearts, but only if we have enough zeal to ask. "No wonder monks prayed at the end of the day in words taken from the disciples, '*Mane nobiscum Domine, quoniam adversperascit*'—'Stay with us Lord, for the evening falls.'"⁷

6. "Walking home" for confirmation in a unified community (Heb 10:25)

And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The appearance of Jesus becomes the seal upon hearts that were already burning with wonder and awe. Infused with life from the age to come, Cleopas and Mary rise and return to Jerusalem, as if it was the dawn of a new day (not to mention the first day of the new creation), oblivious to the dangers of the night. We can hear them singing,

**How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!" (Isa 52:7)**

In her book, *The Cultivated Life*, Susan Phillips observes,

Jesus' attention to the traumatized people on the road enabled them to open their hearts to their own feelings, to him and to Scripture. Then JOY sent them hastening down the road at night to share their good news with those they love. I see this dynamic in people who pray. The love they receive flows through them into the world.⁸

When Cleopas and Mary, breathless with excitement, arrive to tell the news, the band of disciples preempts their report with good news of their own: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon." The absolute miracle of it all is that each disciple has arrived to the same place, through varied and different roads.

As we trace Luke's story together piece by piece, we discover the process by which the disciples came to "know with certainty" that Christ had been raised. In each case it took wrestling with the Scriptures, testimonies from eyewitnesses, and a personal encounter

with the risen Christ to see the Scriptures in a new light, through the lens of suffering. In the end they are all united male and female, slave and free in the bonds of fellowship with hearts aflame to spread the good news.

1. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 293.
2. E. D. Schmitz, “*epiginōskō*,” NIDNTT 2:392-405.
3. Karen Dabaghian, *A Travelogue of the Interior: Finding Your Voice and God's Heart in the Psalms* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), 56.
4. Helen Cepero, *Christ-Shaped Character: Choosing Love, Faith and Hope* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 39.
5. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 294.
6. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 81.
7. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3; Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 398.
8. Susan S. Phillips, *The Cultivated Life, From Ceaseless Striving to Receiving Joy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 143.

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