

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Luke 24:13-35

"We Had Hoped....."

The story of the meeting on the Emmaus road is one of the best loved in the Gospels; it has the elements of a great story – an unknown stranger on the road who explains mysteries to the travelers, eats with them, and then suddenly disappears. Many critics regard it as legendary, for just that reason; but Luke clearly does not, and he sets it clearly in the historic events of that "first day of the week" after the Passover Sabbath.

1) *What Had Happened*

When the stranger comes alongside the walkers and hears their conversation, he asks what they are discussing in such tones, and gets the wonderful rhetorical response "Are you the only one who doesn't know what has happened...?" Jesus of course knows very well, but the question is one we all know the feeling of, because we often sense that we live in a world where *we* are the only ones who don't know what's going on! But the truth is that the two disciples who don't know what's going on – or even who is walking and talking with them! "They were kept from recognizing him" – a typical biblical way of saying God kept them from knowing him, but also very consistent with all the resurrection stories in saying that the risen Jesus was in some ways now hard to recognize.

What *had* "gone on"? It's always worth asking people to tell you, because the way

they describe events can be very revealing. So it is here, and Jesus takes full advantage of the way they describe what has happened and what they had hoped would happen. "Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and man" had been handed over to the Romans and crucified. Clear history, and a fair description of how Jesus was seen by most people up to that point: "a prophet..."

But now comes the disciples' interpretation of the events, and the reason for their "downcast faces": "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel..." What a statement, full of disappointment; "we had hoped..." Are there any sadder words? But then the question presses: *what* exactly had they hoped for? What did they mean by "to redeem Israel"? What most Jews of their time meant was either something very simple: get rid of Roman rule, or perhaps a more complex vision: "God restoring Israel to her former glory, seeing the Temple fully rebuilt, the sanctuary once again filled with the glory of God's presence; seeing pagan rule over Israel finally done away with after more than 500 years; seeing the Davidic monarchy restored according to God's promise; seeing holiness and covenant re-established; seeing Torah-observance re-emphasized; becoming once again the visibly blessed and chosen "people of God."

And Jesus the prophet from Nazareth looked as though he *could* have been a tool in God's hand to accomplish at least some of these things. But now he was dead, another "failed Messiah" like so many before and after him in the 1st C.; leaders of revolts who were quickly executed and their followers soon dispersed. "We had hoped he would redeem Israel," but he had been crucified three days before, along with some other bandits. And "what had happened" included one more sad thing – "our women reported this morning that his tomb was empty and his body gone, and some of the Twelve confirmed that was true."

2) *What Scripture Said*

What a sad tale! Yet it is precisely their telling the story in this way that gives Jesus the opening to speak a word of truth to their "downcast faces." His response is at first abrupt: "O foolish people, and slow of heart to believe..." That's not the way we are taught to counsel grieving people! But Jesus knows what they have never grasped, and when he re-tells the story for them, he knows their worlds will change. They have not understood, they have not believed, they have got the whole story of God's dealings with Israel backwards!

They dreamed of restored glory, of power, of being "God's chosen people." Jesus told them the true story was about suffering, and weakness, and God's grace. He explained to them "from *all* the Scriptures, starting from Moses and the Prophets, what *must* take place..." Now we often get confused at this point, and countless bible studies and sermons have spent time searching for OT texts that predict a suffering and dying Messiah. But apart from a few verses in Isaiah 53, they usually find little, and end up as confused as the two travelers to Emmaus!

What did Jesus find "in all the Scriptures, from Moses and the Prophets" that pointed to him? It's the "big picture" of God's dealings with the world. In the beginning, it was all good, "very good" in fact, but through unbelief and disobedience, it had all

gone sour. Our first parents were exiled from the garden. To redeem his now fallen world, God chose a line of people to carry out a plan – first Abraham, then his descendants, through whom God promised to "bless the world." But sadly, even these chosen ones went astray – down into Egypt, for example. Hundreds of years later, when they had become a nation as God had promised, they again found themselves in Egypt.

But each time they got into deep trouble, when they finally came to their senses and cried out to God, he sent them a deliverer. Joseph, Moses, Joshua; Judges like Gideon and Sampson; men who were called to "rescue the LORD's people, Israel," by the grace of God and the power of his Spirit. But the pattern kept repeating. Israel fell into sin, into social corruption, into servitude to foreigners and worship of foreign gods. God sent Prophets to warn his people to repent: Israel had become like an adulterous wife, they said, and should return to God before it was too late. But they would not, and so first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians overran their land, and God's people went into exile in Babylon for their sin and disobedience. The glory of the LORD departed, and his Temple was destroyed by the pagans.

But now the Prophets were told that God would take a new approach. If Israel was to be redeemed, it would happen through "*a righteous remnant*;" the few believing and faithful and godly people left in a corrupt nation. So when the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed a few Jews to return to their land, a small "remnant" returned. It would not be enough; even they were not united, not pure. And so emerged a vision from God through the Prophets of the exile, especially Isaiah, of *one man* who would "stand for the nation," one man who would be "the true Israelite." He was called "*the Servant of the LORD*."

Five times, Isaiah writes *Servant Songs*. "Here is my Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the

nations. He will not shout or cry out; a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out; in faithfulness he will bring forth justice.” (Is 42:1-3). “Is it too small a thing for my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob, and bring back those of Israel I have kept; I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Is 49:6).

But the Servant is not simply the “focus” of God’s plans for Israel and the world, the “true Israelite;” he will also be the one to bear their suffering. “I offered my back to those who beat me; my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near.” (Is 50:6-7).

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows; we considered him smitten by God and afflicted; yet he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way, but the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is 53:4-6).

Because this Suffering Servant would redeem Israel, a *new* covenant would be established between the LORD and his people; his Law now written on their hearts, their sin remembered no more. “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God, “speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for...” (Is 40:1). Her exile is over!

3) *How God Saves The World*

This was how God redeems Israel, and this is how Israel becomes the “light of the world” that she is called to be. This is how the healing and forgiving power of God will go out from Jerusalem to the whole world. This is how deliverance is made, sins forgiven, the kingdom of God established. Jesus, the

Suffering Servant does for Israel and the world what they cannot do for themselves.

Precisely through the intense suffering of the Messiah, the “one like a Son of Man,” the redeeming power of God comes to the world. Not by armed uprising, but through the cross of Jesus, the God of Israel wins the great victory over evil, over sin, over death, over the powers of darkness in the world. The true King of Israel returns to his city, to his holy hill, but he comes through the wilderness, through the cross outside the city walls and an empty tomb, to redeem all the people who live in exile, ruled by pagans, ruled by sin, excluded from the garden and from the Tree of Life.

This is the story: this is what “Moses and all the Prophets” say about God’s ways with his people. Now the call of God’s people is to take that message of redemption to the world, to the Gentiles who live in exile from God. And they must do it in the same way that Jesus the Messiah did it; by offering forgiveness and grace and healing and love; by preaching the Gospel of the God who loves enough to give – to give his Son to redeem lost people. The people of God must now do what Jesus had only begun: to bring God’s redemption to people everywhere who are just as lost as Israel ever was; people whose societies are a mess, people who are ruled by pagans; people who live in exile from meaning and wholeness and hope and love; people who know they have been thrown out of the Garden and have been wandering in the wilderness ever since.

To do that, the people of God need the ongoing strength that can come only from his presence: and here the Emmaus story does not leave us groping, like those whose eyes are closed. We come away knowing, with everyone who has ever read Luke’s Gospel, that like those two disciples we also can expect to have our hearts warmed as we meet the risen Lord in the explanation of the Scriptures and in “the breaking of bread.”

God deliver us all from “if only...”, or “we had hoped...” Don’t put your trust in power,

or in princes, or presidents or presidential candidates. Don't dream that we could solve the problems of our families, our community, our nation if only "the right people" were in control. Don't lose sight of the Christian gospel, which says that the power and glory and love and goodness of God are shown most clearly in the Cross of Calvary, where the Son of God and Son of Man suffered to redeem the world. That is our hope, and that is our message, at Easter and at every time and place.

Let us pray...