

Easter Message
IT'S NOT OVER!
Luke 24:13-35

The sun had just peeked over the horizon on that memorable first Easter morning. Several women who had been associated with Jesus during his earthly life make their trek to his tomb. But when they arrive, their despondency over his death turns to perplexity ... his body is gone! Suddenly two men – angels – in dazzling apparel, appear to the women. They announce “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen.*”

When the women return to the disciples, they recount their story, but only to have it fall on deaf ears. The disciples seem to conveniently dismiss the account as a delusion of grandeur.

In Luke 24:13 we pick up the account of two of these disciples:

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. Luke 24:13-14

By the way ... here in Portland, Oregon, Easter Sunday morning, 2009, it's 11:15 A.M.. Some of you are probably looking at your watches wondering when this service ends. It was probably also about this time of the morning that these two men were leaving the Western Gate of Jerusalem. Their journey would take them about 7 miles NW down the Judean hills and along a well-paved Roman road to a little town called Emmaus. They're heading home after a traumatic weekend.

We know next to nothing about these two men, except that one was named Cleopas. As they walk along, however, they are engaged in a lively debate about the recent events of Passover.ⁱ They had already heard the puzzling report of the women who had returned from the tomb. You can almost hear the two, intensely perplexed as they rehearse the events of recent days:

(Unnamed disciple) “But Cleopas, how can we trust the report of these women? You know their emotional character. After all, maybe in all their excitement they went to the wrong tomb!”

(Cleopas) “But then again,” Cleopas replies, “what about the two men who appeared to them...is that also a concoction of their imagination? On the other hand, if He isn't alive...where does that leave us? What about our hope that he would be the coming King?”

Verse 15 –

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. Luke 24:15-16

Here they are, absorbed in this intense discussion, when Jesus himself approaches. In fact, he “overtook” them, which is the literal idea here. To you and me, this seems rather odd. What if

you and your family were walking the streets of Portland and suddenly a total stranger joined your discussion? But it wasn't strange for these disciples. It was customary for travelers headed in the same direction to join together and pass time talking while walking.

What *is* amazing, however, is that Cleopas and his companion didn't recognize the identity of their fellow traveler. Luke tells us in verse 16 that their eyes were "*kept from recognizing him.*" Luke's comment is very matter-of-fact and without explanation. This has led to all kinds of speculation, such as "Jesus' body was unrecognizable due to the beatings he had received," or "the disciples were walking west and the sun was in their eyes." But the best explanation is always what the Bible gives. One of the other gospel writers, Mark, in recounting this same event, states that Jesus "*appeared in a different form*" to these two while they were walking in the country.ⁱⁱ Now in no way does this imply that Jesus' resurrection was a mere "spiritual" resurrection. The Bible affirms time and time again that Jesus Christ rose from the dead both bodily and historically.

But I believe that there is another reason why these disciples didn't recognize Jesus on this occasion. Jumping ahead a little, verse 17 says that their faces "*were downcast.*" And they had reason to be! Only a week before, on Palm Sunday, the disciples' hopes had risen to fever pitch when the excited crowds had hailed their Master as the long awaited deliverer from the tyranny of Roman occupation. But then he was put to death – a death of the most degrading kind – and now they have no idea where he is! In other words, for these disciples, *it was over!*

Have you ever noticed that some of the saddest words in our English language begin with the letter "D?" For example – disappointment, discouragement, disheartenment, depression, doubt, disillusionment, despair and death. And all of these words describe the thoughts and feeling of Cleopas and his traveling companion. Isn't this often our experience? When we are "bottomed-out" in despair and doubt, how easy it is not to recognize the presence of God with us...right by us...speaking to us. Rather, our tendency (as for these two men) is to think that somehow God's plans have been aborted and that God of the universe has gone AWOL. He's lost control of the situation. For these two, their hopes of a long-awaited Messiah were now dashed to the ground. Their Messiah was dead and how can a dead Messiah establish his kingdom?

But behind these two reasons for their inability to recognize Jesus stands a third explanation. They simply did not see *because they did not believe.* These men were despondent because they were in disbelief. They had received reports from several of the women as well as from Peter and John. But as verse 11 of this chapter says, "they did not believe ... their words seemed to them like nonsense."

Some of you are skeptics, just like these two disciples. You're saying, "All this talk about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ... it's all nonsense! I don't believe it! Never have, never will!" And even though the historical evidence weighs heavily in favor of Jesus' resurrection, no amount of intellectual reasoning will convince you. You may be just like these disciples – you don't *see* because you don't *believe.*

Before moving on, however, I must mention that the unbelief of the disciples is one of the most convincing arguments for the truth of the resurrection. There's a popular seminar going around these days called *The Jesus Seminar.* One of its basic tenants is that all the talk about Jesus

being the Son of God and rising from the dead is simply a fabrication of the early church. These early disciples wanted to believe so bad that they convinced themselves these things were true! And yet I find that these disciples were not inclined to invent fanciful stories.

Having taken the initiative to join these men, Jesus now initiates discussion by asking a question. "Hey, what are you guys talking about?"

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" Luke 24:17

Jesus' question seems to only intensify the disciples' grief. Luke adds, "They stood still, their faces downcast" (Luke 24:17b). But then...

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem (i.e. the only one who travels in Jerusalem) and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Luke 24:18

Did you catch that? Why, they had thought all Jerusalem was preoccupied with what had happened to Jesus! But if this traveler isn't aware of the news, then maybe Jesus is not only a dead man, but an *unknown* and *insignificant* dead man.

Of course Jesus knows exactly what has happened, because it happened to him! But with great tact, Jesus gives Cleopas a chance to unburden himself. "What things?" Jesus asks. And now you can hear both of them chiming in at once (verse 19),

(Cleopas) "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. (Other disciple) And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, *but him they did not see.*" Luke 24:19-24

Now there were several things these disciples did believe. They *did* believe that Jesus was a prophet from God. They *did* believe that this fact had been demonstrated by his words and works. They *did* believe that he had been crucified and that he really died. He didn't just (as some have said) "swoon" on the cross and somehow manage to resuscitate himself in a cool tomb. And they even believed that he was the one "who was going to redeem Israel." Their problem is that they can't understand now how this is going to take place. Their hopes have been dashed. Jesus is dead ... and maybe even his body has been stolen, for they state "but him they did not see" (v 24). You see, the last thing these disciples expected was a resurrection! In fact, they want empirical evidence as much as any modern day skeptic! For them, only visible evidence will prove convincing.

We must give these men credit for being honest doubters. They were not pseudo-intellectuals, reveling in doubt for doubts sake. They would have been all too glad to believe. But the tragic events of the last few days had destroyed their dreams and expectations. Their hopes were

buried ...deep in Jesus' grave. From their perspective, Jesus was probably dead; and if Jesus was dead, their faith was in vain. ***It's all over!***

Maybe you feel that way today: "It's over!" You might *feel* like these two disciples, on the road called "despair." A broken marriage, a lost job, a hidden addiction, an overwhelming sense of rejection, an unexplainable fear, an unshakable depression, an unrealized dream. By the way, I have felt that way. In 1991 my world fell apart. We were living in France at the time. But six years of language learning and cultural adaptation took its toll and I fell into a clinical depression that forced us out of the country and under the care of two counselors who – for one entire year – spoke words of insight and encouragement into my life. I'll never forget riding a train from the southern part of France to Paris to come back to the States. All I could say to myself was, "It's over!"

And maybe you *are* like these two disciples, failing to recognize the love, compassion and forgiveness of the One who wants to journey with you. Just like these two disciples, *your* eyes are blinded to his presence because of unbelief. Needless to say, in that dark night of my own soul, I was having a hard time recognizing Jesus who journeyed with me.

What can lead you from the sadness of doubt to the gladness of faith? From saying, "It's over!" to declaring "No, it's not over!" Notice verse 25..."He said to them, 'How foolish you are..." Basically, Jesus is saying, "How dull you are. Why this is a 'no-brainer!' You really should have caught on by now!" And then he goes on to say: "...and how slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken!

Oh, these disciples believed *some* of the OT prophecies. They believed that the Messiah would come. But they were having difficulty understanding and believing *all* the OT prophecies.ⁱⁱⁱ Then with the eager gaze of the two disciples riveted on him, he begins to open up the numerous OT passages which demonstrate his point. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Luke 24:25-27

This must have been the greatest Bible study ever taught...because it was taught by Jesus himself! We of course don't know exactly what Jesus said to these disciples. We do know that there are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament about Jesus' first coming. By the law of chance, it would require 200 billion earths, populated with four billion people each, to come up with just one person who could achieve 100 accurate prophecies without any errors in sequence. But the Bible records not 100, but over 300 fulfilled prophecies of Christ's first coming!

I'm sure Jesus must have referred to that well-known Old Testament passage of Isaiah 53, written some 700 years before Christ. Listen to how the prophet graphically describes the suffering that Jesus *had* to endure for our sake...

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... 5 But 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. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Isaiah 53:4-6

And that's why Jesus says to his disciples in verse 26: Did not the Christ *have* to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" This Easter Sunday, do you recognize that Jesus *had* to suffer...and that he *had* to suffer for you? You see, this realization was the key, helping these disciples to move from "It's over!" to "It's not over!" They just hadn't grasped the fact that Jesus *had* to suffer...and to suffer for them. There was no other way. The eternal penalty for sin had to be paid. And Jesus Christ paid it *for you*. The Bible says, "But God demonstrates His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The weight of our infirmities, sorrows and sin can be overwhelming at times. A sin, hurt, loss, heartache, secret...that keeps us barely hanging on, ready to say, "I quit. It's over!" Sometimes those weights we carry around are hidden secrets. A few years ago, a man who owned a small business in Germantown, Maryland, started what he called "a community art project." His name was Frank Warren, and he began handing out postcards to strangers and leaving them in public places. The postcards asked people to write down a secret. The secret had to be true, and it had to be something they had never told anyone. Then people were supposed to mail their postcard to Frank Warren, anonymously. Thousands of people sent in cards, and they still do to this day. In fact, Frank now has a website called PostSecret.com. I looked at it the other day. Here are a few confessions that people have made. I've written them on postcards and tapped them to these bricks to give them some visual weight.

- "When my friends go on diets, I discourage them. This is because I really just want them to be fatter than me."
- "Sometimes I wish that I was blind, just so I wouldn't have to look at myself everyday in the mirror."
- "When I put my secret in the mailbox I felt the same release that I did when I cut for the first time."

But the Bible says: "Surely he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows."

- "I'm jealous of her baby."
- "I started shooting heroin again."

But the Bible says: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."

- "People think I've stopped lying—but I've just gotten better at it."
- "I go to fraternity parties, wait for everyone to get drunk, and steal all their stuff."
- "I waste office supplies, because I hate my boss."

But the Bible says: "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him."

Though not mentioned specifically in Warren's book, here a couple others that you might identify with:

- "My husband cheated on me."
- "I cheated on my husband."

But the Bible says: “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. (Empty the bricks at the foot of the cross). Like a sponge, Jesus absorbs the dirt, the hidden secrets, the darkness, the filth, the losses, the grief, the pain, the relentless hurt of living in an ugly, sinful world. He takes it upon himself. The Bible says that the One who knew no sin *became sin for us*. He absorbs our sin. No wonder he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And that’s why he can say, “You who are weary, burdened, guilty, depressed, broken...come unto me and I will give you rest.” I have absorbed your secret sorrows and sin.

Apparently, this message began to get through to these two disciples. They began to understand: “Ah, you *had* to suffer.” This was their “Ah-ha” moment. And isn’t it interesting that Jesus’ explanation of Scripture led to a personal invitation on the part of the disciples for Jesus to stay with them? Look at verse 28 –

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. Luke 24:28

Given the custom of the day, Jesus could have requested the hospitality of these men. But he didn’t. He waited. He even acted as if He would go on his way. He was testing their faith...and they responded by personal invitation. Jesus is a gentleman. He doesn’t force himself upon us. He awaits your invitation. That is what Jesus himself says elsewhere in the Bible.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20

These disciples did just that. Notice the next verse:

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. Luke 24:29

They didn’t just “crack open the door.” No, “...they urged him strongly, ‘Stay with us...’” they begged. And he did.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. Luke 24:30-31

And suddenly, as he breaks the bread, the scales drop from the disciples eyes and they see! Maybe they notice the nail prints in his hands. But even if not, the passages from the Old T that Jesus had already spoken to them have hammered away at their hearts and brought them to the point of receptive faith. Blindness turns to sight! No wonder they say,

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Luke 24:32

In spite of the fact that it was now getting dark, their meal unfinished, and Jerusalem was several hours away by foot, they set off, feeling compelled to share the news that Jesus had risen from the dead.

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. Luke 24:33-35

Despair has turned to delight! Limping doubt has turned to leaping faith! "It's all over!" has turned to "It's not over!" And it's all because these two men finally saw just why Jesus *had* to suffer and be raised from the dead.

I don't know what "wheelbarrow of bricks" you're pushing this morning. But whatever it is, I invite you to push it right to the cross where Jesus is. Will you accept his invitation? In fact, will you do as these disciples and beg him to come to you, to stay with you, to cleanse you, to walk with you, to change you? There is no sin too great that Jesus cannot forgive. There is no sorrow too deep that Jesus cannot carry. Will you invite him in today?

ⁱ *Syzetein* cf. Luke 22:23; Acts 6:9; 9:29. In fact, Luke's choice of descriptive words here implies that their discussion bordered on debate.

ⁱⁱ Mark 16:12. In fact, in three other instances in the New Testament Jesus was not recognized in the form of his resurrection body. Apparently, Jesus had a normal human appearance, but different enough from what they knew of him before his death that they don't recognize his true identity.

ⁱⁱⁱ They were apparently debating the same issue that Peter says the prophets of the OT debated. How could Jesus be both the one to rule as Israel's king and yet suffer as he did? Here's how Peter states it:

This salvation was something the prophets wanted to know more about. "They prophesied about this gracious salvation prepared for you, even though they had many questions as to what it all could mean. They wondered what the Spirit of Christ within them was talking about when he told them in advance about Christ's suffering and his great glory afterward. They wondered when and to whom all this would happen" 1 Peter 1:10-11 (NLT).