

THE EMMAUS EXPERIENCE

LUKE 24:13-35

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(Written Text only, No Service due to COVID-19 Epidemic)

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The story from this week's text is a story worth repeating again and again because it's at the very heart of the Gospel. It highlights the living hope found only in the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul wrote to his friends at Corinth; "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead" (1 Cor. 15:19, 20). But on that first Easter day that living hope was far from being established in the experience of the two people we read in the New Testament lesson (Luke 24:13-35). Let's put ourselves in their shoes as they set out on the seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was a:

(1) HEART-BREAKING EXPERIENCE

Have you ever noticed that some of the saddest words in our language begin with the letter D? Some of them are disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, despair and even death. All of these are summed up in the words of Cleopas and his companion to the stranger who joined them on the Emmaus road. They had left the dispirited and confused band of disciples with the events of Good Friday fresh in their memories. We can sympathize with their bewilderment. Many of us today are heart-broken for the results caused by this Epidemic.

The Master they had revered, loved and followed had been horribly put to death - a cruel death of the most degrading kind. Death by crucifixion was the most shameful of deaths; the victim was made a public spectacle, exposed to the jeers of all that passed by. 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 longed-for deliverer from the tyranny of Roman occupation but now he lay dead in a sealed tomb! Their hopes were dashed; their dream was over!

The band of Jesus' followers was leaderless and was falling apart, with two of them already on their way home. The reports that Christ's tomb was empty did nothing to alter their thinking; it only confused them. Their entire world had come apart. Today, many of our lives have been so drastically changed; it seems like the world has come apart. The two despondent disciples summed up the situation very neatly, "we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel."

Human hope is a fragile thing, and when it withers, it's difficult to revive. Hopelessness as a disease of the human spirit is desperately hard to cure. When you see someone you love and care for overtaken by illness, which goes on and on; despair sets in. It almost becomes impossible to hope for recovery, to be even afraid to hope because of not being able to cope with another letdown. We are all experiencing these same feelings today. All of us have either friends or family that are or have been sick from this Coronavirus.

The Emmaus two had erected a wall of hopelessness around them, and they were trapped in their misery. "We had hoped ..." What they were saying is, "We don't expect it now, but once we did. We had it, this thing called hope, but now it's gone." I wonder if this is something that we can identify with. Has this epidemic or someone come between our relationships with God? If so, listen to the Emmaus story because the heart-breaking experience is only its beginning!

As the travelers made their weary way to Emmaus a stranger fell alongside them. It was going to be one of the most wonderful walks in history! We know, of course, that it was the risen Jesus but somehow they didn't recognize him. In fact, Luke tells us "they were kept from recognizing Him." It wasn't an accident that they didn't notice who He is or that they were too preoccupied to look at Him in the eye. No, they weren't allowed to recognize Jesus for a purpose. It was so that they might be in the same position as us over 2,000 years later.

Visual appearances of Jesus ceased at his Ascension. They are not granted to us. Like the two on the road we have to make do with other people's testimony that Jesus has risen from the dead. Like them we don't know quite what to make of it. Did it really happen? What precisely happened? How could it have happened? The stranger asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" And so they poured out their sad story to someone who seemed so willing to listen. How wonderfully kind and compassionate is our Lord. He could well have ticked them off, to say the least, for their lack of faith in him. Hadn't he told them that "unless a seed dies, it abides alone but if it dies, it bears much fruit"? (John 12:24). But no, Jesus doesn't berate them, but rather, as someone put it in moving words, "In his infinite courtesy, Jesus remembered the frailty of over-strained nerves and bewildered minds and came, not too suddenly or overwhelming upon them, but with gracious signs and tokens, and messages from one to the other."

The way that Jesus dealt with the situation is a lesson for all of us that are in a position to help those who have lost hope. They need companionship----more now than ever! They need a listening ear before a stream of good advice. Believe me, all you have to do is look at the history of my phone during this epidemic----a lot more

listening! The last thing that people need is a brisk "cheering up" talk or being told to "snap out of it". Instead, let's be there with them. I know that is difficult when you can't gather but they are only a short phone call away. Let's love them by listening, by accepting what it is that they feel. There'll be time later to point them to the way of hope, to the One in whom hope is to be found but first things first. It's then that the heart-breaking experience changes to a:

(2) HEART-FILLING EXPERIENCE

Their spokesman, Cleopas, expressed surprise at even being asked what was worrying them, "Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days?" There seems to be a note of incredulity in the voice of Cleopas, but Jesus continues patiently and innocently asks, "What things?" "About Jesus of Nazareth," they eagerly replied.

The two Emmaus bound disciples were correct in their theology as far as it went. They told the stranger that this Jesus "was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people" (20). "He was ... " - notice the use of the past tense, which strongly implies that he wasn't relevant to the present or otherwise they wouldn't have been in their present downcast state of mind. Their experience of Jesus was in the past, and they thought they were alone. The Cross had taken him from them and their minds hadn't made sense of the changed situation or adjusted to it. The Cross was just a great negative to them.

We've all heard exciting testimonies of what Jesus has done in the past - but what about the present? The past is history. The question must be: is Jesus "a present, bright reality" to those who speak of their experience to you and me? Do we always recognize him beside us? Life has many distractions - hard work, routine, tiredness, ill health - which can so grind us down that we carry on mechanically, never lifting our eyes - or minds - from the dust of the earthly road we travel. We become unaware of the glory and strength of his presence with us. Life loses its meaning and leaves us washed out but this story gives us hope.

Jesus is still here. He's the unseen "stranger" walking with us, listening to us and if we are willing to hear his voice, revealing Himself to us. As the two disciples spoke of the Cross, He took hold of their bewilderment and sorrow and gave them a heart-filling experience. How did He do it? He pointed them to God's self-revelation in the Scriptures. Luke tells us, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." What! The Old Testament! Yes!

Jesus must have given the Emmaus travelers the greatest Old Testament exposition in history - to a congregation of two—perhaps even six feet apart! It was then that the jigsaw of the types, shadows and symbols of the Old Testament revelation began to come together. He would have reminded them that right back at the fall of Mankind; the apparently victorious Satan, in the form of the serpent, was told that the seed, the offspring of the woman "will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15).

And so was foretold the story of the cosmic struggle between death and life, of the pattern of death and resurrection in the Old Testament revelation. It's clearly visible in the life of Abraham, sacrificing his dear and only son Isaac and getting him back again; of Joseph, preserved to become the benefactor of his brothers who tried to destroy him; of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt after having been saved from the angel of death through the sign of the blood of the Passover lamb.

Jesus would have recalled his own teaching of how the Israelites escaped physical death in the wilderness from a plague of serpents when they looked trustingly to a great bronze serpent which Moses raised on a pole, pointing out that he too would be lifted up on the Cross, "that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life in Him" (John 3:15). Jesus would surely have taken the now speechless disciples through the Suffering Servant of Jehovah passages in Isaiah. He would have recounted how the nation of Israel, taken into exile and brought back again to rebuild Jerusalem, was a symbol of the greater redemption through personal salvation through faith in him.

Here was proof that Jesus had fulfilled that which had been prophesied over the centuries; that these Old Testament anticipations of His passion and triumph of life over death, proved that He was indeed the Messiah. The two disciples couldn't have expected that sharing their problem with the stranger on the Emmaus road brought them towards a solution. But there was more to it than that. Christ wasn't there besides them simply to help them to find solutions - He was in the problem itself. Jesus told his two listeners, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things ..."

The problem for the disciples was how to make sense of the Cross, how to accept it. Jesus helped them to do that but He also showed them that the Cross itself was the creative act of God. The apostle Paul would later write, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). The Cross of shame and suffering had become the Cross of Redemption for all who would come to Jesus in repentance and faith.

When Jesus intrudes into our lives, probing our thoughts, it is for the purpose of blessing us. But how do we respond? Do we, like the disciples from Emmaus, welcome his initiative and let him minister to us? Do we want Him to keep talking and explaining what previously baffled us? Sometimes the things He reveals are uncomfortable as He encroaches into our conscience, invades the private areas of our lives.

Cleopas and his companion accepted the gentle rebuke that Jesus made, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." Perhaps the key word is "all". It wasn't that they hadn't read the prophets of old but perhaps they'd read the Scriptures selectively, concentrating on those parts that spoke of a triumphant Messiah who would be kind to his enemies and be victorious. The passages that spoke of a suffering servant didn't fit in with their expectation of the Messiah and they'd tended to skip over them. When they had been given the exposition from the Scriptures they reacted positively, and in fact they wanted even more, which led them to:

(3) THE HEART-BURNING EXPERIENCE

Their two-hour journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus must have seemed like five minutes, being so wrapped up in this absorbing conversation with the Lord they hadn't yet recognized. Luke informs us that, "As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he was going further." Jesus is a gentleman; He won't force Himself if He's not really wanted. He awaited their invitation to come in. Even now, during these troubling times, He awaits us to call upon Him----Pray, Pray, Pray!

God gave to the world the greatest and the most perilous gift in the world, the gift of free will; and we can use it to invite Christ into our hearts or allow Him to pass on. In the vision of the Book of the Revelation we find his words, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline ... 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" (3:19, 20).

There's a famous picture painted of this scene, of Jesus knocking at a door, but there's no handle to it. I expect there is a handle, but it's on the inside! This is very much the situation in the Emmaus story. We're told, "Jesus acted as if he was going further." It was a test to see if the disciples had more appetite for the things of God. They did. We're told, "They urged Jesus strongly, stay with us ..." That's the sort of invitation that Jesus can't resist! "He went in to stay with them."

They needn't have asked Him in; he was ready to move on. But no, their hearts had been won over. A basic

meal was quickly got ready. The bread is on the table and the moment for Jesus' disclosure has come. How does He do it? "He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." It was the action of the breaking of bread. They'd seen it before, or heard others tell of it. They saw his hands - they were different from when he had broken bread at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and at the Last Supper. They were the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. In an instant they knew Him. And in an instant, He's gone. But, He still lives with us!

Why did Jesus have to disappear? Couldn't He have stayed longer? He could, but He didn't because it was all a part of the education of His last 40 days on Earth - how to manage without His bodily presence from now on; exactly the same as we have to do some 2,000 years on. But He is with us still by His Spirit; He is with us as we live in this time.

I can imagine Cleopas and his friend standing in amazement; perhaps embracing in great joy, asking each other "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Their world had come together again. That heart-burning experience is something that we all need. We need it in a conversion experience when the Spirit of God makes us realize that we need Jesus as our Savior and Lord. We need it as we allow the Holy Spirit to apply the truths of Scripture in our daily walk with Jesus.

Well, where are we in our experience? Are we still heart-breaking because we haven't met the risen Christ? Perhaps we're still in a heart-filling searching process - if so, let it continue, as it will surely lead to the heart-burning experience we all need. Christ is risen from the dead! Christ is the Savior! Christ is the hope of the world! The two disciples lost no time in retracing their steps to Jerusalem to share the Good News. God is still with us let us pray:

Lord---We come to you with heavy hearts. We are so very concerned with the way that our lives have been turned up-side down. Our friends and family are sick. Our finances and jobs are less. People are hungry and people----your creation---have still not accepted you as their personal Savior. Dear Lord, you gave us the joy of celebrating your resurrection, even if we could not gather in your holy places of worship. For those that have experienced death during this troublesome time, we know you have opened to them the gate of everlasting life. Lord, we know that when bad things happen to us, you are always first on the scene. Heal each of us with your mighty hand! Amen!