

Easter Sunday

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[0 : 00] I don't know about you, but many times when I read these accounts of people who encounter the resurrected Jesus, part of me feels a sense of wonder and awe, and part of me, quite honestly, feels a sense of envy, a sense of jealousy.

I don't know if you ever feel this way, but sometimes I think, wow, it would have been so much easier to have lived in the first century, and when this happened, to actually see Jesus appear. And if that had happened, and if I had been able to be there to witness it, it would be so much easier to believe. It would be so much easier to have an unwavering faith.

And that's one of the reasons why I love this particular resurrection account in Luke chapter 24, because this is an account of two disciples who are not among the original twelve.

There are many experiences that they were not there to experience or to participate in.

Nevertheless, they have their own encounter with the risen Christ, and when I read this story, I feel like it was particularly included for the sake of people like us, people who lived in the second century or the third century or the twenty-first century or the twenty-second century.

[1 : 25] And so, I am excited to dive into this. What we're going to do is first just tell this story, and then we'll come back to this question of what does it mean for people like us who live so far removed in some ways from these events to experience and encounter the risen Christ?

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for Easter. I thank You for just a tremendous week. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the great vigil last night, Lord.

I'm still tired. I'm exhausted from the vigil, and yet I'm also so filled with energy and excitement to be here together, Lord.

There's just an electricity in the air this Easter, and more than ever, we appreciate the ability, the freedom to join together in person and to celebrate this. And Lord, we know that even as we are here in person, You are here in person, that, Lord, You're present with us, Lord.

And so, for those of us gathered in this building, for those of us gathering online, for everyone who is turning their eyes and hearts toward You, we know that You're the kind of God who will meet us where we are. And we pray that You would do that this morning as we open Your Word, that You would reveal Yourself to us, Lord.

[2 : 35] We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So, let's look at this account in Luke chapter 24. We're not sure who these disciples were.

We're only given one of their names. Two disciples. Only one of them is named. Now, most commentators tend to assume that these were both men, but I actually think that there's a strong case to be made that this is a husband and wife.

In John's gospel, we see a reference to a couple, Clopas and his wife Mary. And I think there's a real case to be made that in this account, Cleopas is also Clopas.

I think it's the same person. And so, we can't know for sure, but what I'm going to do for purposes of this morning is I'm going to assume that this is Cleopas and his wife Mary, and that they are walking home after the events of the past week.

And I just want you to imagine for a second, imagine the events over the last week for this young couple. Imagine them holding hands and dancing and celebrating and crying out, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, waving palm branches as Jesus made his triumphal entry.

[3 : 55] That must have been a high point, the high point in their lives. Then a bit later, when it came time for the Passover meal, we're fairly certain that they were not included among the disciples who were in the upper room with Jesus.

So, they probably met up with some friends and shared the Passover meal with some friends who lived in the city. Then imagine their shock upon hearing that Jesus had been arrested late that night.

Imagine the confusion that they would have felt. Imagine them throwing on their clothes and rushing outside to see a growing crowd of onlookers, everybody whispering, trying to figure out what had happened.

They learn that Pilate has sent Jesus to Herod, and they think, well, that might be a lucky break. Maybe it will go better for Jesus before Herod.

Then Pilate gathers everyone together, and rumor has it that Herod has sent Jesus back to Pilate. And they wonder why are they sending Jesus back and forth like a hot potato?

[5 : 05] What's happening here? And then imagine Cleopas and Mary holding one another in utter disbelief as Pilate does the unthinkable. He offers the crowd a choice.

He says, your custom says, I can release one of these men to you. Will it be Barabbas, or will it be Jesus? Imagine them looking at each other in confusion and shock. How could they even consider Jesus to be guilty?

Jesus is the man that they had known and followed. Jesus is the man who was promising to redeem and restore Israel. They had put all of their hope in Jesus, and all they had ever seen Jesus do, all they had ever witnessed was Jesus being a man of love and compassion and generosity, healing and caring for everyone He encountered.

And yet, to their utter horror, they look around and they began to hear the crowd chanting, crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him.

And they realize they're talking about Jesus. And Cleopas and Mary, they want to do something. They want to say something. They want to jump up on stage and tell everybody to be quiet.

[6 : 13] But they're too terrified. They're too confused. And in the moment, all they can do is watch in mute horror as they begin to take Jesus away.

They feel so powerless. They feel so alone. They feel that the mob has lost their mind. And so they watch as their beloved teacher is turned over to be crucified.

They walk at a distance as Jesus is forced to carry His own instrument of torture and execution. He makes His way to Golgotha, and on the road they say very little, because what can they say?

They don't even want to make eye contact with anybody. All they can do is look at the ground. As Jesus is lifted into the air, Mary sees Jesus' mother and aunt, and Mary Magdalene huddled together.

And so Cleopas' Mary rushes over to comfort these women who stand near the foot of the cross. The rest is pretty much a blur.

[7 : 20] Mary spends time with the other women Friday night preparing spices to finish the burial after the Sabbath. The next day is a long, dull day full of numbness.

Mary has cried so much she no longer has tears. She and Cleopas try to find ways to pass the time, but they barely speak.

The entire city is talking about Jesus' death, and by this point all they want to do is to go home. It's been a tremendously traumatic experience.

Their whole world has been turned upside down. All of their hopes have been shattered. Then Sunday morning, Mary goes with the other women to help complete the burial.

Not long after, she comes running back to tell Cleopas about this bizarre experience at the tomb. She's horrified and confused to report that the tomb was in fact empty, and theories abound.

[8 : 21] What has happened? Has someone stolen the body? What's going on? The empty tomb then becomes the focus of an animated debate as they set out on the two-hour walk back to their home.

It says in verse 15, while they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Now, that's extremely important. Some people say, well, obviously they didn't recognize Jesus because they didn't have enough faith. But that is not what it says. The verb here is passive, which means Jesus is preventing them from recognizing him.

We would ask, why in the world would Jesus prevent them from recognizing him? Wouldn't he do the opposite? Wouldn't he want to prove that it is in fact him? We'll find out soon enough.

This stranger then asks, what are you two talking about? And they stop, and Cleopas whips around, and he's already probably frustrated from arguing with his wife.

[9 : 28] And he basically says, have you been living under a rock? Have you been locked in a basement somewhere? He says, are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened here?

And of course, there's a wonderful irony. The Bible is full of wonderful irony because this stranger is in fact the only person who does know what has been happening, right?

But keeping this going, the stranger says, what things? What things do you mean? And so you can imagine Cleopas and Mary sort of stumbling over one another.

You know, when my wife and I try to tell a story, we're just constantly interrupting each other. And you can imagine them doing this, you know, sort of stumbling over. And then, and you got to tell him about this part. I'm going to tell him about this part. And they sort of lay this story out to this stranger.

And they get to the part, and they say, you know, then some women had gone, and they found an empty tomb. And Mary says, I was there. It was empty. And then they, and then they talked about these two men that were standing near the tomb wearing radiant apparel.

[10 : 34] And then these women, they run, and they tell the other disciples, the 11 who are gathered together, 11 because Judas at this point is gone. But of course, when they get there and they begin to tell their story, everybody kind of realizes, well, you know, these are women.

And everybody kind of knows that the testimony of women is suspect. And so they send some men to give a proper report. And the men get there, and they don't see any glowing people.

But the tomb was definitely empty. And the men begin to say, well, surely there's a more rational explanation for this. These women have been traumatized. They're clearly imagining things.

But then the stranger says something totally unexpected, beginning in verse 25. He says, oh, foolish ones. And you can imagine, they stop the story, and they say, what?

Oh, foolish ones. And this is said in a very loving, gentle way. Oh, foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Mary and Cleopas look at each other.

[11 : 42] What's this guy talking about? The stranger continues, was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? They say, necessary?

What? Our beloved teacher, the man that we followed, the man that we've given our own, it was necessary for him to suffer? Are you insane? So, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, this stranger begins to interpret to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Now, later they would describe a feeling as this man spoke to them and opened the Scriptures to them of their hearts burning.

In other words, I felt as though I was coming alive inside. Have you ever put your arm over a chair back or crossed your legs for too long, and that limb falls asleep?

And then when you move it and the blood comes back into the limb, it has this kind of tingling, burning, hypersensitive sensation. Imagine that happening in your heart. A part of your body that had long ago fallen asleep that is coming alive.

[12 : 49] The life is surging back into it. It feels almost unbearably sensitive. And they describe that feeling happening as he opens to them the Scriptures.

They're beginning to realize this stranger is far more than he appears to be. So, they beg him to come spend the night with them at their home. He acts as though he's going to keep going, continuing this sort of, you know, ruse.

Oh, no, it's okay. You know, I'm going just a little bit further. And they said, no, please, please stay with us. And the text implies that that was his plan all along. Then they sit down together to eat that evening.

And the stranger, sitting between them probably, takes the bread. Verse 30, he took the bread, he blessed it, and he broke it, and he gave it to them.

That probably sounds familiar because it's the exact identical language that the words Jesus used when he instituted the Lord's Supper not too long ago.

[13 : 53] And at the moment they received the bread, verse 31, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And then he vanished from their sight. Now, imagine a table back then would have been shaped like a U.

And Jesus being the guest would probably be seated at the center of the table, Cleopas on one side, Mary on the other. Jesus gives them the bread, and then Jesus vanishes, and they're left with what?

They're left because of the shape of the table, holding the bread and looking at one another. They immediately get up, even though it's late. They run all the way back to Jerusalem.

It's a two-hour walk. They find the eleven disciples. They burst in, and they tell them, get ready. The Lord has risen indeed. The Lord has risen indeed. And then, then they tell them what has happened on the road.

They tell them everything that they've experienced. And it says, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. So, just like these two disciples, we find ourselves confronted with the claim of the empty tomb and the claim that Jesus has risen to life again.

[15:07] And when it comes to the resurrection, there's a lot of evidence to support it. You know, some people ask, well, how do we, how can we be sure that the resurrection happened? There's a lot of evidence to support the fact of the resurrection.

You know, people like Luke and Paul, when they wrote down these accounts, they were writing within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. And they weren't saying, and here's the, here's an important point.

None of these accounts are written in a way that says, you know, we have this private religious experience. You know, if you look at the prophet Muhammad or Joseph Smith or, or other religious founders, they all have in common the fact that they have a private religious experience.

I was doing this thing, and then this being appeared to me and downloaded all of this information to me, and now it's my sole job and responsibility to share all of it with you. But the entire religion hinges on you taking this one person's word for it.

But that's not what we see in Scripture. They didn't have a private religious experience. Paul says that there were over 500 people who saw the resurrected Jesus. There are multiple accounts written from multiple perspectives, multiple people with different agendas, but they're all saying the same thing.

[16:21] And when they write these accounts, they deliberately include all kinds of random details. You know, John gives us in one of his resurrection stories, Jesus appears to the disciples on the beach, and they catch some fish.

Definitely beach, and they catch some fish. And they, and John gives us the exact number of fish.

And you say, well, why would John tell us that there were 153 fish?

Well, he's making sure to include all the details he can because he's giving us an eyewitness account. He's not saying, once upon a time they caught many fish. He's saying, I was there, I saw it, we counted the fish, there were 153 of them.

Luke doesn't just tell us that Jesus ate some food and was sated. He says, there was some broiled fish sitting on the table. Jesus ate the broiled fish because he's just telling the story as it played out. We get the names and hometowns of people even when they're not relevant to the story. In John chapter 18 verse 10, after reading about the servant who got his ear cut off, there's this parenthetical statement, right?

[17:31] Servant gets his ear cut off. Parentheses, the servant's name was Malchus. Now, you can try to spiritualize the name Malchus, good luck, but it has really nothing to do with the story.

The only reason it's included is because all of these details act like first century footnotes. They're giving you details because they're writing this down in the century when all of this happened and these people are still alive.

And they're saying, this happened, the guy got his ear cut off, Jesus healed his ear. If you don't believe us, go find Malchus, one of the soldiers who lives in Jerusalem and he'll tell you.

And so you have all of these details included so that people could check the facts. In Acts 26, Paul says to King Agrippa about the resurrection of Jesus, he says, King, oh King, you know these things happened.

He says, they didn't happen in a corner. You know, everybody knows this happened. They didn't happen in a corner. You know that this happened. At this point in history, this was public knowledge.

[18:35] And the debate that was happening is not whether it happened. It was how it happened and what it means. How do we make sense of this thing that nobody was expecting?

The Romans certainly weren't expecting it. The disciples weren't expecting it. They thought Jesus was a political revolutionary who might overthrow Rome. They did not expect anyone to personally come back from the dead.

When they talked about resurrection, they were talking about the great resurrection at the end of time when God comes to judge all people on the earth and everyone was raised to life again. They also talked about the resurrection of their nation, a kind of national symbolic return to glory and independence and autonomy.

They were not talking about a person being killed on a cross, buried in a tomb, and then coming back to life physically. There was no category for that. And so everybody's trying to make sense of it.

So there's a lot of evidence to support the claim that the resurrection happened. But I want to submit to you this. That's not the point of this story.

[19 : 41] I think what Luke 24 shows us is that evidence alone is not sufficient. We live in a post-Enlightenment rationalist culture where we highly value empirical knowledge.

And empirical knowledge is very important. But this is telling us that there's something in addition that is every bit if not more important. Jesus is very clearly intentional about how he reveals himself to these disciples.

And I think this is because Jesus doesn't just want our rational assent. Jesus is after the heart. The first way Jesus intentionally reveals himself is through the Scriptures.

Now, you need to understand, Cleopas and Mary already knew the Jewish Scriptures, potentially better than we do. But it wasn't until they began to understand them with Christ as their guide that something began to shift inside them.

It wasn't until they began to recite these same verses through this lens, a Christ-centered lens, that they began to feel the first surges of spiritual life within.

[20 : 58] The thing we need to understand about the Bible is the Bible isn't really a book. It's more like a library that all fits together in one volume. It was written over a period of thousands of years in many genres from history to wisdom to poetry.

It was written in a variety of languages by as many as 40 different authors. And yet somehow it all fits together to tell one story.

And at the very center of that story is Jesus Christ from Genesis to Revelation. As Sally Lloyd-Jones says in the opening of the Jesus Storybook Bible, every story whispers his name. Adam was the first human, but Adam failed in his calling. That story is important, but it doesn't make sense unless you understand that Jesus is the true and better Adam who remained faithful and shows us what human beings are supposed to be.

Jesus is the true and the better Abraham who left everything in order to form a new people and bless all the nations of the earth. Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between God and His people and mediates a new covenant.

[22 : 18] Jesus is the true and better David who defeated the true Goliaths of sin and death and sits on the throne of heaven as the rightful king. He's not just a prophet who hears God's word.

He is God's word in the flesh. He's not just a priest who offers empty sacrifices. He's the great high priest who is the sacrifice, the only sacrifice that can atone for sin.

He's not just a king. He's the king of kings. And one day all kings will kneel and kiss the ring of the true king of the heavens and the earth. The entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation exists to reveal the risen Christ.

And unless we understand that, unless we read all of Scripture through that lens, we will have lots of interesting reflections, insights, collected human wisdom, tips for living, tips for flourishing, tips for marriage, but it will never really make sense.

It will never cohere. It will never actually do what it's intended to do, which is to bring us face to face with the risen Christ. The second way Jesus reveals Himself is through the gathered community of His people, in particular as they gather for the Lord's Supper.

[23 : 37] We are meant to experience Christ through one another. We are meant to experience Christ as we gather together to worship Him.

And when we celebrate the Eucharist, when we gather around this table, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, 16, the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Now, the word participation is the word *koinonia*, which means intimate fellowship and communion.

He's not just saying, how great is it to remember the things that Jesus did as we share this meal?

He's saying, when we eat this particular meal in this particular way, Jesus is with us.

We are in fellowship, in *koinonia* with Him. We are experiencing intimacy with Him. You can only do that if He is here with us in this experience. And I think this makes a huge difference for people like us, who live 2,000 years after the events that we're talking about this morning.

[24 : 44] Because if we were merely given evidence, and if we were given this pile of evidence, and there's a lot of it, and then we were asked to decide whether or not we believe in the resurrection, even if we decide we do believe, we're still going to feel pretty disconnected from these events.

You know, we say, yeah, I believe this happened a really long time ago. I really wish I could have been there. That would have been very life-changing. But I suppose I believe that this happened. And that would pretty much be it.

But Luke 24 shows us that it is actually possible for us to experience the risen Christ, and to have an ongoing relationship with Him, just as the first disciples did.

It's saying this is something that all believers can experience. You didn't have to be included in the original 12, who kind of somehow won the lottery and got to be there. That this is available to everyone, everyone who desires it.

And, you know, I say this as someone who has experienced these things in my own life. In college, I was reading the Gospel of John. Some of you know this story.

[25 : 55] And I had grown up going to church, and I had grown up somewhat familiar with the Bible, and so it wasn't the first time that I read the Gospel of John. But as I was reading it on this particular day, I felt something shifting inside me.

I felt that sense of a quickening in my own heart. I felt that something was happening that I didn't fully understand or have control over. I certainly wasn't engineering it myself.

But I felt that something began to shift in me, and I felt this realization emerge in me, blossom up in me. This is real. This is true. Jesus is alive.

Jesus is here. And I felt this realization hit like a wave. And all at once I realized I believe this. And I look back on that experience as a time when, as a person who grew up in the faith and had been baptized, I actually came into a real relationship with Jesus experientially, in a way that I hadn't experienced before.

And it came through His Word. And then a few years later, I was asked, I was in a church, and I was asked to help give communion. And I was very distracted. At this time, I was in graduate school.

[27 : 08] I had papers due. I almost hadn't gone to church that morning. And I was tired. I'd been up late working the night before. And I said, okay, I'll give communion. And I took this plate of bread, and I began to give it out.

And all at once, I just began to feel this surge in me of love. And before I knew what was happening, I began to weep. And I began to give the bread to people.

And I began to say to people, do you know how much God loves you? Do you know how much God cares about you? And then I began to hug people. And I kind of looked like I was having a nervous breakdown. I'm not going to hug any of you today. Don't worry about it. You're like, I think I'm good. But at this particular time, the point is I kind of lost myself. And the only way I can explain that is that I was participating in Christ, that somehow in this experience of coming together around His table, Christ's love overshadowed me and filled me and began to pour through me.

That was the experience for me that was one of the things that confirmed that I, you know, my mentor later asked, well, how do you make sense of that? What, you know, and I said, I don't know, but all I know is I want to do that for the rest of my life.

[28 : 21] That's what I want to do until I die. Now, I don't experience these things every time I open the Bible. Sometimes I do. I don't experience these things every time I give or receive communion, but sometimes I do.

But whenever someone asks me, why do you believe? Why are you a Christian? Why do you do what you do? I not only point to the objective evidence for Jesus, but I also point to my own subjective experience of Jesus.

And I believe that that is how Jesus wants us to know Him, rationally and experientially, objectively and subjectively, with our minds and our hearts.

All right, so if you're someone who wants to know Jesus, the evidence is there, the evidence is necessary, but the evidence is not sufficient. Jesus reveals Himself very intentionally through the church, in the ministry of word and the ministry of table.

So I encourage you, seek Him there and pray that as we sang earlier, He might open your eyes and open your heart and reveal Himself to you as the risen Christ.

[29 : 39] Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word and we thank You for being the kind of God who, as we said last night, is a subversive missionary God who is relentlessly seeking reconciliation, even with the most vile and wicked and violent people of the earth.

Lord, people like the Ninevites, people like Cleopas and Mary, people like me, people like those of us gathered here. Lord, we pray that as we do gather around Your Word and gather around Your table, we pray as we celebrate Your sacrament of baptism in just a moment that You would make Yourself known to us this morning.

It is You, Your face, that we most desperately need to see. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.