

Encountering the risen Jesus

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Date: 26 April 2026

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[0 : 0 0] So if God is real, why is he so hard to find? It's a question that I've heard many, many times, a question that I've asked at various points in my life.

If God is real, why is he so hard to find? Why doesn't he just make himself obvious? If he wants people to believe in him, why not remove all doubt?

Why make it a guessing game? Seems like it would be so much easier to believe in God if we could just see him, have a conversation with him with our own eyes, hear him with our own ears.

The question we're going to be considering this morning is this. What if the problem isn't that God is absent? What if the problem is actually that God is present, but that we simply don't recognize him? What if God is the one who shows up? And the question is whether or not we show up. In Luke 24, that's exactly what happens.

[1 : 0 5] This gospel reading that we just heard read by Hillary. We have two disciples who have followed Jesus. They know Jesus. They have experienced firsthand the ministry of Jesus.

And yet he comes alongside them after his resurrection. He walks on the road with them. He has a conversation with him. And they completely fail to recognize that it's Jesus.

In order for them to recognize Jesus, Jesus in this passage, as he does in nearly every post-resurrection story we have, in order for them to recognize that it's Jesus, Jesus has to make himself known.

He has to reveal himself. So the question is, how does he do that? How do we go from being with God and not recognizing him to recognizing that he's been with us all along?

Let's pray and we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that you're all in here. And we thank you that we're not here to consider the thoughts or the words or the wisdom or the ideas of people who lived centuries ago.

[2 : 1 6] We're here to receive and to respond to the voice of the living God. Lord, there's a reason we ring these bells. And it's because you're alive. And so it's your voice that we seek to hear, Lord.

We pray that by your grace you would speak and we would have the ears to hear. In Jesus' name, amen. So this is the afternoon of the first Easter Sunday.

All of the events have taken place. The arrest, the crucifixion, the burial, the empty tomb, right, which these disciples have heard about. But Luke tells us that these two disciples, one named Cleopas, are actually walking away from all of that.

They're walking away from Jerusalem. And we need to be clear on what this means. They're walking away from hope. They're walking away from their community, the community of disciples.

They're walking away from everything they thought God was doing. In fact, it seems as though they've given up. And they're arguing as they go about how to make sense of the events of the last few days.

[3 : 1 8] It says in verse 15, as they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. Verse 16, very important.

But they were kept from recognizing him. Now, this is very important. If God wants us to believe in him, if Christ wants people to believe in him and follow him, why would he keep them from recognizing him?

The risen Jesus is with them, walking alongside them. But he prevents their recognition. The reason is because he's showing us, he's showing them and through them us, how he wants to be known from this point forward.

The way we encounter the risen Christ after the resurrection changes from the way the disciples interacted with him before his crucifixion. So Jesus asks in an almost playful way, what are you guys talking about?

And Cleopas basically says, have you been living under a rock? Are you the only one in the whole region who doesn't know? Everybody's talking about this. This is the talk of the town. Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened here?

[4 : 32] And then Jesus says something totally unexpected. Oh, foolish ones. Now, this is a very playful, playful tone. 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 verse 27, imagine this. And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, which is the entire, what we refer to as the Old Testament.

Moses and the prophets. That's Genesis to Malachi. That's the whole thing. And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

And at this point, the disciples begin to realize there is a lot more to this stranger than meets the eye. So they eventually arrive at their destination. They arrive at their village. Jesus seems as though he's going to keep going.

But they urge him to stay. Please stay the night with us. That night, verse 30, when he was at the table with them, he took bread.

[5 : 33] He gave thanks. He broke it. And he began to give it to them. And then their eyes were opened.

And they recognized him. And he disappeared from their sight. Now, if the wording sounds familiar, it's because we've heard these words before.

Two chapters earlier, in chapter 22, when Jesus institutes what we call now the Eucharist, the meal that we share at this table. When Jesus institutes this meal, when he commands his followers to continue sharing this meal until he comes again, it says this.

And he took bread. Gave thanks. Broke it. And gave it to them. And there he says, this is my body given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. Luke is wanting us to connect this moment in chapter 24 with these two disciples in Emmaus to the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper or communion, whatever we grew up calling it to this meal.

[6 : 45] Luke is wanting us to see there's a connection here. What Jesus is doing with these disciples. He is meaning to show us this is the Eucharistic meal. And indeed, the early church fathers, all of the first Christians of the first few centuries, the leaders of the early church, they all recognize this as a clear reference to this meal.

St. Augustine says in his homily on this, And no one should doubt that his being recognized in the breaking of bread is the sacrament, which brings us together in recognizing him.

So let's just summarize all of this is an incredibly mysterious passage. But let's just pull it together. Jesus comes alongside these two disciples who are confused.

They are dismayed. And he prevents them from recognizing him until two things happen. The scriptures are opened.

The bread is broken. And the point is this. When we read the scriptures the way they were meant to be read, when we receive this meal the way it was meant to be received, we should expect to encounter the risen Christ.

[7 : 58] We should expect to recognize Christ who is with us. Now, some people might hear this and say, okay, that's great. You're wearing a robe. Obviously, you have high-fueled beliefs about all this stuff.

Does this mean, are you telling me that this is the only way I can encounter Christ? That this means I can't encounter Christ when I'm on a run or hiking in the woods? Does this mean that I can't encounter Christ if I'm in my hospital room crying out to him?

Can I encounter Christ in the grocery store? Or can I encounter Christ in a dream the way many former Muslim converts to Christianity say they have encountered the risen Christ in dreams?

And I would say absolutely not. Of course you can encounter Christ those ways. Of course. And I think it happens all the time. Christ is all-powerful. If this really is the God who created the heavens and the earth, and if he has really overcome sin and death, then he can make himself known anywhere and anyhow he chooses.

I think he does. I know people, there are people in this church who have had powerful encounters with Christ in all kinds of ways. But there are some ways through which Christ promises to make

himself known.

[9 : 15] So it's not a maybe. It's an always. When the scriptures are opened. When the bread is broken. Christ makes himself known.

In other words, this is the normative way Jesus intends for us to recognize him. This is the place he intends for us to find him.

It's in the pattern of what the church refers to as word and sacrament. And this has major implications for, we could consider this all day, we're not going to be at ease, but we're going to consider a few of the most pressing implications.

The implications for the implications for the way we read scripture, for the way we come to this table together, and for the way we worship in general. So let's talk about those three sets of implications. The way we read scriptures. The way we read scriptures. Modern society is full of people who have grown up in a kind of Christian or post-Christian or Christian adjacent world.

[10 : 19] And they think they know scripture. And yet they have never read it the way it was meant to be read. Because all too often people have an understanding of the Bible that it is simply meant to be turned into a catalog of do's and don'ts.

Live this way. Don't live this way. Do the good things. Don't do the bad things. Or people grow up and they read books and they listen to podcasts and they come to think that scripture is essentially a resource guide.

Or a toolkit for self-improvement. And there are so many products on the Christian marketplace that reinforce that. Moses becomes a guide for successful leadership.

You know, Daniel's faithfulness in Babylon gets turned into a diet plan to help you lose weight. You know, David's defeat of Goliath is about facing our own giants and believing in ourselves.

This is like standing at a large picture window. And there's this gigantic picture window. And you're looking at the windowsill.

[11 : 30] And you're focusing on the frame. And you're looking at the curtains. And maybe even you're looking at the glass. But you never bother to look through the window at the view.

And the whole purpose of the window is the view. And you're missing it because you're looking at the windowsill. Right?

All of the Bible, friends, is like the ultimate picture window. You're not just meant to look at it.

Although there's a lot of value to be gained. You know, from looking at it.

You're meant to look through it. You're meant to see what it all points to. You're meant to see the vista, the view, the beauty of Christ put on full display. Right?

So we're not just meant to look at it, but through it. So when we read about Adam, who was the first human who failed in his calling, we're meant to look through that. To Jesus.

[12 : 27] Paul gives us a hint in the New Testament when he refers to him as the new Adam. He's like, there's more to this story. Jesus is the one who succeeds where Adam fails. And he shows us what human beings are supposed to be like.

We read the story of Noah. Noah built an ark and it delivered his family through the flood. There's a lot to be learned from that. But Noah points us to Jesus.

You look through it and you recognize the true ark of history is not a boat. It's Christ who delivers us safely through the waters of God's judgment.

Marked in our baptism. We look at the story of Abraham. Inspiring story of a man who leaves his family and his kindred and his land behind. And he goes to a place that's not his home to form a people who are then going to be a way that God blesses the nations.

And it's an amazing story. But you look through the picture window and you see Jesus who leaves heaven above to come and live among us to form a new community, which we call the church, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

[13 : 37] Right. You have to look through Moses to Christ. Because Christ is the one who sets God's people free from bondage to sin and death and mediates a new covenant.

Right. You look through King David to Christ who defeats the true Goliaths of sin and death and now sits on the throne of heaven. You look through Jonah who didn't go Christ who didn't go into the belly of a fish for three days.

He went into the belly of the earth for three days. He went into the tomb. But he came out the other side. So Christ is not just a prophet who hears God's word.

Christ is God's word. Christ is not just a priest who offers sacrifices. He's the great high priest who offers the one true sacrifice himself. He's not just a king. He's the king of kings. So the Bible is not just a book. The Bible is a place of encounter. We should open it with fear and trembling.

[14 : 44] We should open it with excitement and wonder and awe. Because when you open it, you're on dangerous ground.

You're going to come face to face with the living God. And you realize all of a sudden this is no longer under my control. The entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation exists to reveal the risen Christ.

So when we open the scriptures, don't just ask, what lessons can I learn? That's a valuable question. Don't stop there. Ask, how does this lead me to Christ?

Ask, what is this saying to me? What is Christ saying to me through this passage? What is Christ revealing about himself through this story?

Where is Christ calling me to deeper trust and faithfulness and reliance on him? The way we read scripture will determine whether or not we encounter Christ.

[15 : 45] The way we receive the Eucharist, the way we come to this table, second implication. I might ruffle some feathers.

Or hopefully said more accurately, Luke 24 might ruffle some feathers. I hope that's the case. We all come from different backgrounds. One of the great things about our community is that we have people from every stripe, every kind of background here.

So some of us grew up in churches where we did the Lord's Supper and maybe you did it a few times a year. And it was a way to remember Jesus. Nothing more than that.

And so maybe you did it a few times a year, but it wasn't really that big a deal. Really the preaching is where it was at. This was sort of a memorial that you do from time to time. Other people I know in our community, you grew up in a Roman Catholic background or you go to a Catholic school now. And you're taught that the Eucharist, the bread and the wine, are transformed into flesh and blood. Their very substance is altered. And that's a cornerstone defining belief for you if you're Roman Catholic.

[16 : 51] Some of you, I'm delighted that you're here because you didn't grow up in church. You have not the foggiest idea of what we're talking about right now. And you think the whole idea of a God revealing himself through bread is utterly bizarre.

That's a crazy idea. Who thinks that, right? And I think that if we understand this passage correctly and the other passages that it refers to, I think it's going to ruffle all of our feathers a bit if we're in one of those categories.

So for those of us who think that the idea of encountering Jesus through a meal sounds strange, it is. It is bizarre.

But here's the thing that you need to understand. Christianity is not merely a set of ideas in your head or feelings in your heart. God meets us through ordinary physical means.

Water. Bread. Wine. People gathering in his name. On the mission field. In times of prayer, right?

[17 : 56] These ordinary things that we do. These ordinary gatherings. The words of ordinary human beings spoken. The loaf of bread that Janice and the congregation baked yesterday.

Being broken open. Something happens. And that's because God made the physical world. That's because God loves the physical world. And that's because it is God's great delight to use the physical world to make himself known.

So God uses physical ends to accomplish, physical means to accomplish spiritual ends. One of the ways theologians talk about this is to say that grace perfects nature.

It reminds us what the physical world was for. It's to make Christ known. In many ways, this entire physical world is one great sacrament. Meant to reveal the God who made it all. So why would it be so crazy that he would use a loaf of bread?

The very mountains are meant to reveal his presence. For those of us who grew up in churches where the Lord's Supper was just a memory aid or a way to remember or mark what Jesus did 2,000 years ago.

[19 : 06] Let's ruffle some feathers. I want you to notice that this story is very carefully constructed. Once Jesus breaks the bread and their eyes are opened, he vanishes from their sight.

This is not accidental. There's a message here. Christ withdraws his visible presence because he is now meant to be known sacramentally.

He withdraws his visible presence because he wants to be known sacramentally. The mode of presence changes and the message is clear. He's saying from now on, church, you're not going to be seeing Christ bodily across the table.

You're going to be receiving Christ sacramentally at the table. So this meal is far more than just a memory aid. This is why when the apostle Paul talks about this meal in 1 Corinthians 10, he says this.

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

[20 : 17] So he's not saying, is this not a way of remembering Christ? He's saying this is a participation, right? Participation implies actively sharing and experiencing something, communing with Christ himself.

So there's far more going on here than mere memory. Now, if you come from a Catholic background or go to a Catholic school where you're taught that the bread and the wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus.

Let's let's let's let's ruffle some feathers. OK, Jesus is truly present at this table. There's no denying that. But notice how he is present.

He's the celebrant. Right. He's the host of the meal. He's the one who takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. He gives it.

And then he vanishes. And through that action, the disciples eyes are opened and they recognize him. So Jesus clearly connects himself to the bread.

[21 : 23] He uses the bread to make himself known. The bread is a vehicle for that. But it is spiritual. Luke does not say that the bread stops being bread.

Luke does not say that the bread turns materially into Jesus's flesh. He doesn't give any indication that the substance of the bread was changed at all.

And I would I would say with all due respect, if if that were the central point of this text, we would expect loose Luke to give some indication of that. But he does not.

In fact, there's not a single verse in all of scripture that says the substance of the bread changes in any way. Instead, Luke shows us something both simpler and more profound.

When it comes to the bread, Christ is really and truly present in it. Right. He gives himself to his people through it.

[22 : 25] So when we receive it, we receive him. And this is what the church believed. If you look at the early church fathers, if you look across the centuries for a thousand years, the church believed in what we refer to as the real presence of Christ in the meal.

But by that, the church meant the spiritual presence of Christ in this meal. The belief that the bread is transformed into flesh, what we call transubstantiation, arose later.

Medieval Catholic theologians were trying to understand this mystery, to penetrate the mystery.

They're trying to find a way to explain exactly how is Jesus present.

How does it work? What are the mechanics of it? It's like when we read Genesis 1 and 2 and we think that we're getting a cosmological account of how the universe was physically actually created.

We're reading it as a science text rather than recognizing this is a liturgy. It's poetry. It's theology.

They were trying to penetrate the mystery on a scientific philosophical level.

[23 : 36] When they did that, again, with all due respect, I think they lost something along the way. Trying to define exactly how Christ is present in the meal is like dissecting a bird to understand its song.

By trying to understand the parts, you lose the music. I would offer this. The point is not to solve the mechanics. The point is simply to receive the gift and allow it to be the mystery that it is.

This also impacts, finally, friends, the way we worship. The entire purpose, if we are reading this correctly, of Christian worship, what we're doing here now, is not entertainment.

Though, of course, we hope it's engaging. It's not inspiration. Though, of course, we hope people leave inspired. The point of this gathering is encounter. It's encounter.

So, for those of us who are Christians, for those of us who have been going to church for a while, let me ask us this. Does this change the way we think about worship on Sunday mornings?

[24 : 48] If we really believe that by coming here and doing these things, these ordinary, mundane, physical acts, that we could encounter the risen Christ, would that change how we approach worship on a Sunday morning?

Imagine that you have the opportunity to meet your favorite celebrity. I don't know who it is, Taylor Swift, you know, Leonardo DiCaprio, Barack Obama. I don't know who your favorite person is. But whoever your person is, imagine that somebody told you on a particular Sunday morning, this person is going to be here.

And if you show up, you're going to get a chance to meet this person and shake their hand. You know, I know how some of you feel about some of these people. And I know exactly what would happen. You would clear your schedule to make sure you're available.

You'd probably show up early, right? You'd probably agonize over what you were going to wear, right? You'd make sure that you were clean and presentable, right? And most of all, you would probably show up with a sense of expectancy.

You would show up and you'd be like, where is she? Where is she here yet? Where is he? Can you see him? Can you see? And your whole posture would be waiting for that encounter to happen, right?

[26 : 00] So if we would do this for some celebrity, how much more should we do this when Christ promises to meet us here through word and sacrament?

You know, I've thought about myself and how there are so many Sundays when we're, you know, we're up late on Saturday night and I wake up and I'm tired and I think, man, I guess I've got to go because it's like my job.

But there are times when, you know, or there are times when you're battling your kids and it's so hard and you're like, let's just take this Sunday off because, oh, we already had this travel soccer and we just got back late last night because we were, you know, we were playing a soccer game in Missouri and we just got back here.

And so we're, you know, let's just, let's, we'll go next week, you know? And it's so, we've all done that. We've done that, right? But you think if we truly believed that we could come here and encounter the risen Christ, you know, I think about, I would prioritize that over everything else.

I would come early. When the scriptures read, I would be, you know, I would turn everything off and I would be with rapt attention. When I'm invited to come to the table, I would be, I would be, I would feel a mixture of excitement and reverence and awe.

[27 : 15] And I would be standing in that line and I would be like, it's three people in front of me. I'm almost there. And I would be waiting for that encounter. You know, I sent a pastoral letter out this week on our common worshiping life.

It was too long of a letter. So it's, but, but I don't do the TLDR too long. Don't read version. I would encourage you to take a moment to read it. I wrote it as I was in this text.

I wrote it from my heart. I wrote it because I love our church and I wrote it because I think this is something that we need to hear. So please read it. If we actually believe that Christ has risen, that he's here, then the way we come to worship should reflect that.

Final, final word. For those of us who are here who are not Christians, who are trying to figure out what you believe, who are still think all this is weird or strange, who maybe you are a Christian or you were at some point in your life, but you feel like you're for years, you've been very distant from God.

You feel like maybe God is absent. If there is a God, I've never felt any connection to that God. God is absent. Here, I would submit to you, is the most beautiful thing about this story.

[28 : 28] The disciples in this story are not seeking Jesus. They're walking in the opposite direction. Right? They've given up.

They're like, God, if there is a God, has abandoned me. God is absent. Whatever I thought God was up to, he let me down and I'm not going to trust him anymore.

Right? They're going the other way. Here's the most beautiful thing about this story. Jesus is the one seeking them. Right? Jesus is the one who comes alongside them.

Jesus is the one who reveals himself to them. You know, St. Augustine, in his confessions, he says, you know, most of my life, I would tell people that I've been seeking God, that God hasn't shown up. And he says, but then I came to realize I was never seeking God. If I'm really honest, I wasn't seeking God. He says, my only hope is that God was seeking me. And that's what we see here. So

even if you feel like God is absent, friends, if you hear nothing else, God is never absent from you. [29 : 32] God is never absent from you. Christ is here. And Christ is with you. And chances are, if somehow you got tricked into coming into this room, he's been walking alongside you for a long time.

He has come alongside you. If there's any prickling in your heart, any movement inside, any of the slightest interest, I guarantee you it's because your heart is beginning to burn because he's already there.

And I guarantee you this. If there's one point the entire Bible makes clear is that he wants to make himself known to you. You have only to say yes.

You have only to receive him. Let's pray. Our friends, we gather here in the name of our living Christ.

And Lord Jesus, because you are here, we can pray for you. And Lord, because of that, we know that anything we bring to you, if you are willing to go into the depths of the earth, or if you are willing to endure what you endure on our behalf, then we know that your love is the kind of love where we can bring anything in for you.

[30 : 46] And simply, Lord, we ask, make yourself known. Lord, we go to encounter you, to see you, to receive you, to be changed by that encounter. Lord, I lift up those who are here in particular who may be suffering or feel that you're distant or struggling in some way, Lord, that maybe only you know.

Lord, I pray that in this time, even over these next minutes as we pray and sing and confess and come around your table, Lord, I pray that you would have a palpable sense of your presence through the Holy Spirit.

I pray that you would minister in ways that only you can do, Lord. And we pray this in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.