

On the Road with Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Excellent. Still with me? That's wonderful. So I was delighted when I arrived and I saw the readings that have been scheduled for after Easter.

! And although I tinkered with them a little bit, what I was delighted to see was that this passage from Luke 24 was right there early on, because actually, this is personally a really important passage of Scripture for me.

And the Lord has used it in the past to deeply minister to me. So if it's okay, in some sense, this is going to be a little bit of sharing of that part of my testimony with you.

But I hope and I'm pretty sure that in this room, there'll be those who find themselves where I was and that this passage, as the Lord speaks to us, will bring you hope.

Okay? Let me pray and then we'll go. Lord, thank you for the words that were read by Wendy. Not just words, but your living words pointing us to the living Saviour.

[1 : 1 0] And I pray that as I share, Lord, your Spirit would be speaking to each one of us. Amen. Amen. Great. Well, so it's probably quite helpful, isn't it? Week two. I've come back for the second Sunday and I suppose many of you are glad. That's quite good.

Thank you. Yes. Thank you. And it's actually a really good opportunity to share a little bit of my story. So although I had a sort of church background, I went as a youngster, I just didn't see it. I didn't really get the point of it until I was a music student in London. And there, I mean, by God's grace, he met with me. I realised my need for the first time in my life of a Saviour that I needed forgiving.

And really, my time as a music college student in London was a real rollercoaster, not only with the sort of musical stuff, but actually in my faith journey. And I quite quickly got involved in various ministries, both at church and in the college I was at.

And it was a great time. And I met my wife, Amy, whilst I was a student there. And we quickly decided we were going to get married quite soon after we graduated.

[2 : 2 2] And we both thought we spent a lot of time doing music. Let's together explore whether doing Christian ministry is something we want to do. So we landed up getting married in the church, worked in the church, worked together for the first couple of years of marriage.

And then we went away. We went to do some international student work in Amsterdam for a few years, which was great. And then during that time, I was, as I say, I was persuaded.

I felt the call to get ordained and I was encouraged to do that. And as many of you know, I trained down the road at Trinity, which was great. And then did my first training post as a curate in Tiverton in Mid-Devon.

So I've been circling around Clevedon a bit, which is now I've landed, which is wonderful. And it's funny being a man with a dog collar. I'll just check because my daughter just pulled it out.

I've put it back in. That's good. Because you become a bit of a sort of professional Christian. And that has filled with all sorts of pitfalls.

[3 : 2 7] Because although I can get up here and say this and that, I can sound as eloquent or not as I am. Actually, what's going on inside, I warn you, can be different.

And there was a particular season as I was a curate where up to that point, it had been so exciting. I'd been so full of the Lord and so passionate to make his name known. And I began to experience, I suppose you might call it sort of burnout.

And I began to realise that inside me it was getting quite dry. In fact, it was becoming quite dead.

And I began to, actually that led to a whole load of, you know, your state dictates your story, doesn't it?

So the story that I'd been telling myself, or not telling myself, but I'd been hearing, all full of hope and joy, it began to get a bit darker. And I began to feel distant from the God that I knew and loved. And I knew in parts of me that he was still there. But it was distant. And I began to sort of question all sorts of things. I began to doubt the calling that God had on my life. It was a really quite difficult time.

[4 : 32] And obviously it raised all that sort of tension. Here I am, telling people about Jesus, trying to run ministries. And inside it's a very different reality.

Now, some of you are clergy in the room, but others are not. But I wonder whether my experience of feeling distant from God, or dry, or even in a dark place, is something that might resonate with you.

Some of you might be in that place right now. Bless you for being here. Anyway. Anyway. Whilst I was a curate, there was a local retired clergy person who used to sort of open up the upstairs loft in her, effectively a bungalow, for people to come and have sort of little retreats.

And she'd invited me to come. And I was, Amy blessed me to be out for 24 hours. And I don't know if you know the story of Elijah, when he's just defeated Ahab at the back of the camp and he's on a real low.

And he goes underneath a tree and he curls up and he's sort of like, oh, Lord, just take it all from me. And I felt a bit like Elijah at that point underneath the tree.

[5 : 47] But right there, just as it was in that story of Elijah, that is where the Lord fed me, like the ravens did with Elijah. There wasn't any ravens or pigeons or seagulls at that point.

But there was a definite feeding that God did at that time. Because, as I literally laid down in that place, he led me, started making me think about this passage, the road to Emmaus.

And so I read it. See, I knew it, but I read it. And suddenly I began to see myself as one of those disciples on that first Easter day.

Got two disciples walking around and I just put myself there. And I wonder if you can enter into that imagining like I did then. What would it have been like to be those two disciples?

You've been around Jesus. The last three years have been, wow, a roller coaster of excitement.

And, you know, just think about the miracles you've seen and all that you thought might happen.

[6 : 51] You've got great dreams of God's kingdom breaking in. The Romans being like taken off their rule. Victory and triumph.

And you're part of it. Wow. And then on Palm Sunday, there's the rejoicing. By Thursday, he's being betrayed.

By Friday, he's being tortured. And now you're getting these strange messages that he wasn't at the tomb that he was left in. And they just can't make sense of it.

I can easily imagine myself in that position. And they're wandering around going, what is going on?

Because there would have been shock. There would have been shock.

There would have been in grief. And that kind of trauma does all sorts of stuff to you. You can't think straight. So it's a dark and confusing time and painful for those disciples.

[7 : 49] So you can see why that resonated with me, where I was. And yet it is exactly in that place where the Lord Jesus meets with them. He starts walking alongside them.

I mean, who knows? He might have been walking alongside them for a long time before, before they even realized. And of course, they don't realize that. But he's there.

He is walking alongside. And he starts to gently minister to them. I talked a little bit last night about the shape of Jesus' ministry. He's doing that here with them. He answers their questions.

He inquires. He's curious about them. And he begins to open the scriptures to them. And that is a Bible study I would love to have been part of.

He begins to connect the dots of all those promises that were made in the Hebrew Bible that they would have known to the events that were beginning to unfold around them. The dots are connecting.

[8 : 49] But it wasn't just some kind of cerebral academic exercise. We're told that their hearts, when they reflect back, their hearts were burning within them. Wow, something is being revealed here.

And, yeah, I mean, clearly it was quite a long Bible study as well. I mean, as they walked along. And so by the end of the day, Jesus looks as if he's going on. And they're like, no, no, no, no. Stay with me.

I mean, I don't know who he is. But there's something so attractive and life-giving and hope-giving about this person who's on the road with them. Stay with me. And it's like they won't let him go. And so wherever they stayed, they won't let him go until they've eaten with him. And that's a great phrase. Because when you see, there's a lot of eating that goes on in the Bible.

That's why I love the book so much. But that eating together, whether it's with enemies or close friends, there's always a sign of fellowship. And they want fellowship. They want connection with Jesus, even though they don't even know who he is.

[9 : 53] And I wonder, there may be some of you here who are on maybe an early stage or you can sit at an early stage in your journey of faith. And there's something about this church, about the sense of community, even about the worship, that's deeply attractive to you.

And you come back and again and again because something is drawing you. And you're not maybe sure of who or what it is. But there's a burning fire within you. And you want to know more.

If that's you, again, it's brilliant that you're here. And I want to tell you up front that that person is Jesus. He is the one who's drawing you to himself.

I've got a picture that Gwen is going to pop on the board. And this is Cavaglio's famous depiction of the supper shared with those two disciples.

And we're told, as he breaks the bread, he reveals himself to them. And in this picture, obviously, there's a lot of cultural overtones here.

[11 : 02] And you get the sort of picture of the priest Christ doing that. And we share communion today. And there's something about, as we break the bread, as we remember the man who broke his body open for us, that we find, that's at the heart of the revelation of who Jesus is.

And so there's no coincidence that it's as he broke the bread, as he shared that, the penny dropped, their eyes were opened, and they saw that the man who had been with them was Jesus.

And no more, they sense that, he disappears. Mysterious and amazing. But can you imagine?

And we get that sense from the story as it begins to unfold. That has changed everything. They, whatever burdens they were carrying, whatever downward gaze they had, they were lifted.

And you can imagine them sprinting back to the other disciples to say, it's true, we've seen the Lord, we've been with him. And they may well still have a squillion questions.

[12 : 10] But what they know is that they've met with the Lord and that he is for them. He has been with them and he is journeying with them. And there was something of that experience that I had.

And the Lord was gracious enough. As I came in that place of real darkness, and I just read this story quite simply. And I was like, oh, Lord, you've always been with me.

And you're here again. Just a reminder, a gentle reminder of his presence. Who he is. What he went through. Actually, he knew what it was to experience dark places. Suffering to the extreme.

And he is the one, my brother, my friend, who walks with me in that. And I have to say, I can't say that I was instantly like a jack-in-a-box bouncing my way back home.

But just the light began to dawn again in my life. And that sense of dryness and darkness began to dissipate. And it's up and down.

[13 : 09] And maybe some of you are thinking, well, this is a strange thing for the vicar to start off early on. We're talking about his days distant from God. But I want to tell you again, if you're early on these stages, and many of you will know this, this is a journey we go on with God.

And he is willing to be with you through the mountaintop experiences, where he is, you know, so obviously with you. And it's, you know, it's all experience. But he will be with you in the dark valleys too.

He's with you. He will walk with you. And he wants to reveal and give you hope. And I want to encourage you that, yeah, it's as simple sometimes as just opening the scriptures.

You know, I don't know what your Bible reading habits are. And I want to encourage you to read as much as you can. But particularly those moments where you are feeling in a dark place, a difficult place, an isolated place.

He's given us this written word to allow us a real sort of access to his living word, the Lord Jesus.

And so I just encourage you, whether it's a psalm, whether it's a, you know, just like this, a kind of famous gospel story, just remind yourself of reality by reading this.

[14 : 17] Because we can get surrounded by all sorts of stories that we've already been praying about this morning. And let's get our sense of reality back on track, as it were, by reading this book.

And we'll find there that the Lord meets us in his word. And I'll just continue my story a little bit. And I'm not going to run it all the way to arriving in Clevedon.

But it's safe to say that the sense of God being with me has always continued, whether that's in bright light or in slightly dim light. He continues to guide and strongly sense of bringing us here. But actually on that very night, when I was in that little lady's bungalow loft, actually this story kind of came alive in a bit of a song.

Now, some of you were here last Thursday and I said, oh, you know, I'd woken up and this song dropped down. You're going to have a feeling that that's what, every morning I wake up and suddenly this music drops in. But this is one of the occasions, and it does seem that the Lord uses, sometimes struggles to bring about something creative.

[15:17] And this version of this story, again, sort of came into my head. And I've gradually put it to some music and regimen.

And I'd be delighted to sort of share that with you. Even more delighted that it won't be me singing, but Amy's going to sing it with me playing. And I hope that just using it as a reflection for you, and maybe asking yourself the question, well, where on the journey am I?

Where on the journey am I? And where am I longing for some hope and the presence of God? And maybe even today, he wants to meet you afresh and to make himself more known, more present to you, whatever you're going through.

So we'll just sort of reset ourselves. Amy, I think you're up on the red microphone. We haven't practiced it in here yet, so excuse us. Okay.

On the road, I trudge down, Anger and tears of all I see.

[16:50] All that I dream now lurks defeated. And this I know is wounding me.

On the road, a stranger joins me.

What's going on, I cannot say. When all I thought is true seems distant, And what I know confuses me.

And as I walk, you're there beside me. And as you talk, my fears are stilled. And as your word reveals your glory, My heart will burn with hope again.

On the road, a voice familiar. On the road, a voice familiar, Echoes of songs sung long ago Promise once made in Christ completed And this I know light spars in me On the road, his face still hidden Come stay with me, I won't let go Through broken bread or revelation And then I know it's Christ with me And as I walk, you're there beside me

[18:59] And as you talk, my fears are still And as your word reveals your glory My heart will burn with hope again On the road, my God elected I join with friends to tell the world The risen Lord now reigns from heaven And this I know he is for me And as I walk, you're there beside me And as you talk, my fears are still And as your word reveals your glory

My heart will burn with hope again And as your word, my God elected I join with friends to tell the world The risen Christ now reigns from heaven And as your word is for me And as your word is for me And as your word is for me Shall we pray?

So Heavenly Father, thank you That you're with us on our journey And whether we feel that we're in a dark place At that moment Or the bright light is shining Thank you that in it you are there And you are glorifying yourself And as you reveal yourself to us Your desire is that we reveal you To those around us So send us out in the power of your spirit To be the people loved by you That want to make you known And thank you that you do reign from heaven It's all about you, Lord And we don't need to fear We don't need to do anything special within ourselves To make ourselves right with you Because you've done it all In the breaking of your body You died for us And as you rose again Yes, you're alive And we can know you Thank you, Lord Amen Amen Amen