

Revelations On The Road To Emmaus

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[0 : 01] The resurrection event that outshines all the others, at least for me, is the one that we've just heard, the walk to Emmaus, which, as you know, is the major part of our lesson reading from Luke chapter 24.

To hear that story read as another Easter day phase is always a moving experience for me because it is so full of the essentials of the ongoing Christian church and the Christian way of life based upon, of course, the presence of the risen Christ.

And like so much of scripture, we can never exhaust its meaning and message. And yet in this passage, in a very real sense, we have drawn together, you might say, the great Anglican balance upon word and sacrament.

I am told that there is an Anglican church in Toronto where the walk to Emmaus is depicted on a large stained glass window. An erector who has stayed there for something like 30 years is said to have preached on that scene at every Easter even song.

And every sermon was different. I can understand that having preached a few sermons on this event. And I think it would be great just to do a series of sermons on those 23 verses which describe this wonderful Easter event at the very heart of the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel.

[1 : 27] Basically, it's the record of how the risen Christ overtook two of his most downcast followers and went along with them until they got a new lease on life and their hearts began to burn for the joy that was in them.

Now, I think it's true to say that these two friends of Jesus were not two of the twelve. But they were followers and were walking to a little village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, I suppose, about the same distance from here to UBC or someplace in Bernabe.

They were absorbed in conversation and undoubtedly they were serious, solemn, and sad. And then something unbelievable happened. Jesus himself drew near and went with them.

Even more unbelievable was the fact that they did not recognize him. We wonder why they didn't. Was there something about him or something about them that so strangely blinded them?

Did he look different? Had his features or form changed a great deal? Well, that is a possible approach to our question. But there is another.

[2 : 42] It is possible that they didn't recognize him because they were not looking for him. Often people don't see or hear the obvious, especially if it's unexpected.

And if you are not expecting to see Christ, if you think that he is dead and buried, you are not likely to see him or to recognize him when you do see him. And certainly he was the last person they expected to see.

Yes, our view of God and our experience of him is very limited, to say the least. I believe it was J.B. Phillips who said that your God is too small.

And that's especially true when we begin to look at the great message of Easter. Getting back to those on the road to Emmaus, Jesus breaks into their conversation by asking the two what they were talking about.

And this kind of baffled them and brought them to a halt. And then Cleopas comments, You must be the only person in Jerusalem who didn't know or doesn't know what happened.

[3 : 50] To which Jesus replied, What things happened? And very quickly they described Jesus' events which led to his death. And then in verse 21 comes one of the saddest lines in the Gospels.

But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. In other words, they had hoped that he was the one who would set them free.

Always when I read that line, it seems to me that as if all the hopes and fears of all the years that were met with him on Christmas Day were shattered to bits on Good Friday.

And I know reading again subjectively that this has happened in one way or another over and over to all of us. For instance, those of you who can think far enough back to remember the last World War will remember how people hoped that it was a war to end wars.

But, but, More recently we can remember how we hoped that the death of people like John Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the dropping of the atomic bombs would chalk society into sanity.

[5 : 09] But, but. And I suppose on a less serious note, and especially if you are a hockey fan, think of how year after year the faithful have hoped for the Canucks.

But, but. Well, I think I'm setting up to make the point that there probably isn't a person in this congregation who doesn't know what it means to have his or her highest hopes dashed to the ground in one way or another.

And that isn't all. So says the men on their way to Emmaus. In verse 22, they inform us that some women went to the tomb and when they got there, the body of Jesus was gone.

The women, they said, were told that he was alive. They went back and told some of the men who went immediately to see what had happened and they saw the empty tomb but they didn't see him. And probably they could have added, we don't know whether the body has been stolen.

All we know that it is gone. You know, there are probably people in this congregation tonight and many more this morning to say nothing of millions in this confused world who have all the evidence of the resurrection right there at their fingertips but they have never had the experience.

[6 : 28] They can see the empty tomb but they've never seen the living Lord. Perhaps the conversation that follows in Luke 24, verse 25 onward can help us to do a better job of communicating with such people.

Jesus begins to speak to them and as he often did, he raises a couple of questions. The first would be a bit hard to take and not the best way for us to begin our conversation and communication as it tells them that they are rather foolish or rather stupid.

And then he asked them another question which followed quite naturally. Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory? He didn't give them time to answer the question but if he had, I can imagine that their answer might go something like this.

Why should Christ suffer? It's such a barrier to religion. Certainly it's a mystery. In other words, suffering to them in any shape or form was a crippling thing.

And this particular suffering so undeserved, so brutal, so cruel was a curse. It couldn't be an entrance into glory of any kind. There was nothing glorious about it.

[7 : 46] And when you get right down to it, it is not something we accept readily either even after all these 2,000 years of experience. Not really.

Most of us don't regard suffering as the way into glory. I think that as Canadians, Americans, good, loyal North Americans, brought up in the spirit of democracy, and this doesn't just apply, of course, to this continent.

With all of its achievements, I think it's true to say that we are taught to believe that success is the way to glory and prosperity and prosperity is the way to peace.

Seems that we have forgotten what Good Friday is all about. So let's just pause for a moment to listen to this comment from a booklet that I read on Good Friday and it's based on our Lord's words from the cross.

It is finished. One of the most excruciating aspects of all suffering is how long it takes to be finished.

[8 : 52] Our healthy instincts lead us to recoil from all suffering and to terminate as quickly as possible that from which we cannot escape. Some suffering, however, is a part of healing.

P.T. Forsyth's view of the cruciality of the cross has this helpful paragraph. Our suffering can only be finally dealt with by him who is more concerned about our sin, who is strong enough to resist pity till grief has done its gracious work even in his son, and who can endure not only to see the world's suffering go on for its moral ends, but to take its agony upon his own heart and feel it as even the victims do not for the holy purposes final blessing and the far victory of his love.

Getting back to the walk to Emmaus, we find that in Luke 24, verse 27, that Jesus tried to explain the suffering Messiah, the suffering Savior to them by opening the scriptures to them.

How we wish that we might have heard that exposition of the scriptures as they walked on that country road toward Emmaus so many centuries ago, and one wonders what Old Testament passages he chose to expound.

By this time, they were approaching the village. He was going further, but they asked him to stay with them. It seems to me that one can never put that invitation in better words than those of the King James Version, which also reminds us of that old familiar hymn, Abide with us for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.

[10 : 48] And he went in to tarry with them. He went in with them, but note this, he wanted to be asked. He did not go until they asked him.

It reminds us of that famous painting of Home and Hunts with Jesus standing at the door, which has no handle, but as he knocks, he hopes to be invited. which I believe was based on Revelation 3.20, Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me.

In other words, it seems to me that God never forces himself upon anyone. He has given to every person that incomparable freedom to reject him.

Sometimes it seems to me that this is the greatest dignity that he could have given to a person. Woe to the person who does reject him, but it is a wonderful thing to have the privilege or the freedom to reject him or to accept him.

For when we accept him, we know that we do it of our own free will. Thus, we have to be very careful not to manipulate or pressure people.

[12 : 06] And I personally found it a wonderful experience to move from being a Christian because of fearing what God might do to me to being a Christian because his love and freedom overwhelmed me.

And certainly, it also improved my image of God. Getting back to the trio who had arrived at Emmaus, it was time for supper.

And when they sat down, the stranger took the bread, gave thanks, break it, and gave it to them. And then their eyes were opened, they knew him. We come to know Christ in many ways, but especially in the study of the scriptures and in the breaking of bread.

And by the breaking of bread, I don't just mean in a sacramental way, important as that is, and we rejoice in the Holy Communion service tonight and those held this morning. But the breaking of bread also extends to other areas of life because Jesus is not confined to a church any more than we are.

We can meet him in the slums or in a hospital ward. Yes, even in the midst of prostitution. I say that not only because Mary Magdalene, who according to John 20, was the first person to go to the tomb and encounter the risen Lord, may have been a former prostitute, but I wanted to single out prostitution as one of the greatest challenges for the church and society, not only in Vancouver, but worldwide.

[13 : 45] And just recently, I read about a Sister Mary of the Good Shepherd Sisterhood in the Philippines, whose main mission in life is to the prostitutes. especially around the U.S. military bases in that country.

It seems that some years ago, an airplane on a mission of mercy during heavy floods on the island of Lausanne had to land at the Clark Air Base because it was running out of fuel.

And one of the passengers was Sister Mary Soul, S-O-L. and there she saw the horror of prostitution and was called by God to have a ministry to those thousands of people there in order to break bread with them, so to speak.

And her ministry is now linked with individuals and organizations in more than 40 countries who are tackling this terrible evil. Sister Mary sees the prostitutes as more sinned against than sinning, burdened with deep guilt feelings.

And most of all, she says, community attitudes need to change. Too many Christians only know personal sin. They need to do more about social evil and be part of the fight to free hundreds of thousands of women from this evil that ruins so many lives.

[15 : 11] And of course, that's only one of many social evils that the risen Christ wants to help us overcome. But we can't do it on our own, which reminds us of one more thing about the Emmaus event.

Remember, there were two of them together, and they were two of a kind, these two followers. They both believed in Jesus, and in doing so, they faced great opposition. It was an unpopular cause, and as they enlisted themselves in his service, they saw the people with prestige and power in the nation lined up against them.

But they put everything they had in Jesus, and now it seemed to be a lost cause as they were going back home, sadly disappointed. But that's not where the story ends.

It goes on to say that they talked together of all the things that had happened, and the accent should be on together. While they shared together, Jesus drew near and went with them.

In other words, they were not single, isolated individuals. They were two people drawn together by a common concerns and interests, and in their companionship, I would almost go so far as to say because of their fellowship, Jesus appeared to them.

[16 : 33] while we cannot be dogmatic about the way life operates, and while it is true that some of the great things in life come to us when we are alone, still some things are revealed to us only when two or three are gathered in his name.

I think this is especially so about the reality and presence of Christ. In other words, being a Christian is being an involved member of the Christian community, and that includes small groups as well as the congregation.

And certainly, Jesus used the small group experience in Emmaus to make his presence known and later on at various other locations when his followers were together.

The last lesson I want to note about the Emmaus event as the first Easter Sunday drew to a close, and as Easter 1986 does likewise, is that no sooner did they recognize him than he vanished out of their sight.

He didn't stay long. It is one of the mysteries of life. In my experience, it may not be so in yours, and I know that there are exceptions to every generalization, but within the limitations of my life, the great experiences have been fleeting.

[17 : 53] They cannot be preserved on the mountaintop or anywhere else. They can be remembered, but they cannot be kept forever except in our hearts.

One of the things I always notice when I read this story is that they did not ask any of the questions that I am sure most of us would have asked if we had been there under those same circumstances.

While he was with them, they didn't ask him, where have you been? Tell us what it was like. Where are you going now? What do you want us to do? They didn't ask any of those questions about life after death that intrigues so many of us.

And when he left, they didn't ask why he left them so abruptly with so many questions still unanswered. They didn't ask any of these questions, but they did ask one question.

After he had left, they asked, didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us by the way? That was the question they asked. But actually, it's not a question at all.

[19 : 00] But it's an affirmation of something wonderful that had happened to them. The story ends by telling us that they finished suffering and went back to Jerusalem immediately, quite a walk to say the least, and imagining, I suppose, that when they got there, they would meet the disciples and tell them something that would stir them to the very depths, something that they had never heard or suspected or had any idea of.

But when they got back and found the disciples, much to their surprise, the two heard the disciples verify their experience as the disciples said to them, The Lord has risen and has appeared to Peter.

Then the two told their story, the story of their walk and how a stranger drew near and went with them and how they recognized him when he broke the bread.

Their story, their personal experience, what an experience it was. And what a wonderful story it still is after 2,000 years as washed across its pages.

But it's also our story and hopefully our experience even tonight as like those two from Emmaus, we hear the scriptures and now participate in the breaking of the bread.

[20 : 22] And so I end with this prayer. Open our minds, our hearts, and our spirits, O God, to every sign of Christ's presence wherever we may be.

And above all, help us to find him in the scriptures and in the bread broken for us and the wine poured out that in him we may find the life we want and need and that in him we may see the glory of his being and the beauty of his love and the reality of his Easter.

Amen. And during this step, the offering will be taken.

Amen. Amen. Amen. And during this step, Thank you.

Thank you.

[22 : 24] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. in the red prayer book. And together we're going to pray a number of prayers. And after each prayer that we pray together, I'll leave a space for specific prayers that we can pray on our own or out loud.

[25 : 30] So starting on page 39, we'll read the first prayer there for the church universal together. Amen. Make it holy through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Father, as we come together on this Easter day, we remember the church all over the world. We thank you for the gift of being able to worship you freely here.

And we pray for those countries where there's no freedom of worship. And pray that you will sustain those ones that you want. Let's turn over to page 50, the bottom of the page.

And pray for peace in the world. And think of the large world, not only of the church, but of the nations.

Together let's pray. Almighty God, from whom all thoughts of truth and peace receive, kindle, we pray, in the hearts of all men, the true love of peace.

[27 : 22] And guide with pure and peaceful wisdom those who take counsel for the nations of the earth, that in tranquility thy kingdom may go forward till the earth is filled with the knowledge of love.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Let's pray for specific areas of the world. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

within them. Let's pray for ourselves on page 56. We can talk of the page. Together.

[29 : 34] O Heavenly Father, who in thy Son Jesus Christ has given us a true faith and a sure hope, help us, we pray, to live as those who believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of life, and strengthen the faith and hope in us, all the days of our life, through the love of God.

Amen. Amen. And across the page, to pray for one another and those of our body who are in need, let's pray the general intercession.

Be mindful, O Lord, of all that... Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.