

Luke 24:13-35

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Today's Bible passage occurred on Easter Day.
That might not have struck you before
because in the church calendar it's often read on another day.
But the incident on the road to Emmaus occurred the day Jesus rose.
It was the end of the Passover festival.
All the travellers who had made the journey to Jerusalem for the feast
were heading home.
That was large numbers of people
because many of the Jews came up to the temple for the feast.
Jesus' followers came up to Jerusalem too
Because they were good Jews.
There was no sense amongst Jesus' followers
that he was starting a new religion.
Far from it.
Jesus was recalling God's people to the true heart of their own faith.
So Jesus' followers came up to Jerusalem
to celebrate God's greatest rescue of his people –
The time that God released his people from slavery in Egypt.
And they witnessed an even greater rescue of God's people –
When God released us from slavery to sin and death.
At that point they didn't realise that is what they were witnessing.
And so the death of their Lord left them totally bewildered.
And when the feast was over
where else would they go but back home again?

So there they were, Cleopas and his friend.
They were trudging the 11 kilometres home to Emmaus.
It's a long walk.
For a fit person you might walk it in three hours.
Most of us would take a bit longer.
Plenty of time to chew the fat.
To have a long chat and try to make sense of what had happened.
Now Cleopas and his friend were disciples of Jesus,

But they were not of his inner circle –
They were not of the twelve.
So they probably didn't travel around with Jesus the whole time.
They were probably just heading home to their families
who lived in Emmaus.
They weren't of the twelve apostles,
But they were close enough to them
to know exactly what had taken place that morning.
They had heard that the women had been to the tomb
and had found it empty.
They knew that angels had appeared to the women
and told them that Jesus was alive.
But if you look hard,
You can see a subtle change in the story
As they relate it unknowingly to Jesus.
“Some of our women amazed us.
They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body.
They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels,
Who said that he was alive.”
It's not exactly right, is it?
If the women were there listening,
They would have said,
“No, it wasn't a vision of angels,
They were really angels standing right next to us.”
That's how Luke told the story earlier in the chapter.
“Suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning
stood beside them.”
Why did Cleopas and his friend change the story ever so slightly?
It was because they didn't yet believe that Jesus was really alive.
They were puzzled about what was going on.
They were confused.
But they couldn't bring themselves to believe that Jesus had really been
raised to life.
If that's where your mind is,
Then it's far easier to believe that the angels were a vision.
A vision might be a trick of the women's minds.

Angels standing next to them are far harder to argue with.
Cleopas and his friend had heard
the goings on of that first Easter Morning –
But in their hearts Jesus was not yet alive.
Even though in reality he had been already raised
and they had been told about it.
And that is why
when Jesus travelling incognito stopped them on the road
And asked them what they were talking about,
It said “They stood still, their faces downcast.”
They’d heard the good news
But they were still sad,
Because they didn’t quite believe it yet.

It shows just how much it takes
To get someone to believe in the resurrection.
Even if their friends see that the tomb is empty
and tell them that angels have told them that Jesus is alive,
They still can’t believe it for themselves.
The women believe because they heard the angels first hand –
But these men had only heard reports from friends.
You know yourself,
That if something really strange and hard to believe happens to you,
You are utterly convinced.
But if you tell a friend about it,
It’s harder for them to believe
because they didn’t actually have the experience.
If they tell one of their friends about what happened to you,
If it’s strange enough,
That person may well have all sorts of alternative explanations
in their mind.
Getting the good news of the resurrection out there
was always going to be a hard sell for the early church.
A small group of people who were part of things
might consider it a life changing experience.
But how would people in far flung lands

and people of future generations have their lives changed by it?

I often help with the Anzac Day service at The Bays.

One of the reasons

that we choose to keep traditions like Anzac Day going more than 100 years after the events that took place at ANZAC Cove and the whole Gallipoli Peninsula is because we want the lives of future generations shaped by these events.

We want future generations to remember the horrors of war
So they don't repeat the mistakes of the past.

We want future generations
to take on the values of courage and mateship
that inspired that generation.

But despite our best efforts
as time passes the contact we have with those life changing events
inevitably grows weaker.

New generations who hear about events
can never be changed by the stories
to the same extent as those who experienced the events for themselves.
Can you see that this is a direct challenge
to the ongoing relevance of the resurrection of Jesus?

And yet this is not our experience.

Our experience is that the impact of Jesus' resurrection
continues to transform lives in every generation.

That small group of disciples
who were Jesus' followers in the first century
Became a group of churches scattered all around the Mediterranean Sea
within 50 years.

Within 300 years the group of people
who were transformed by the resurrection of Jesus
had become the most influential group in the Roman Empire
and the Emperor himself had become a Christian.

Today followers of Jesus are in the midst of every nation on earth.
Much to the chagrin of some in our secular society,

the transforming power of Jesus' resurrection shows no signs of weakening.
How can that be?

What Jesus did with Cleopas and his friend was to point them to the Scriptures. They had heard the story from women and that hadn't convinced them of the resurrection, So now they needed to hear the story from the Scriptures. Jesus basically gave them an extended Bible Study. 24:27 It says, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

When Luke says, "Beginning with Moses" he means the books attributed to Moses. That means Genesis to Deuteronomy. When he says, "All the prophets" he means the former prophets, Joshua to second Kings, As well as the writing prophets like Isaiah and Amos. And when he says "All the Scriptures" he's including the writings as well – Books like the Psalms and Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. So what do they say about Jesus? They don't mention Jesus by name. But they do say lots about God's Messiah and what he will be like. In Deuteronomy, Moses had told the people that God would send a prophet like him. Someone who would speak the very words of God. In Exodus, God tells the people to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on their door posts, So that when the angel of death came, He would pass over the houses of the Israelites and only kill the first born of the Egyptians who kept God's people in slavery. Cleopas and his friend would have been well aware of this piece of history –

Because it was what they had just been in Jerusalem celebrating.
But why did the lamb need to be killed?
Surely the angel of death
could work out the right houses to go into by himself?
But the blood of the lamb was more than a sign of where to go –
It was a substitute for the blood of the oldest son.
A blood sacrifice was required because this is a just universe.
Sin must be paid for by death.
The Israelites were sinners just like the Egyptians.
Their eldest sons had to be paid for.
Just because the Israelites hadn't been involved
in the cruel oppressive slavery of the Egyptians
Doesn't mean that their lives were pure before God.
But how can the blood of a lamb
be enough to pay the price for the sin of a human?
Jesus would have explained to Cleopas and his friend
that the blood of a lamb is not enough.
The only reason God could accept the blood of the lamb
is because it pointed forward to another sacrifice –
A perfect sacrifice.
The prophet Isaiah spoke of a figure that he called God's servant.
Isaiah says that the servant would be punished
on behalf of God's people.
“He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.”
The servant's sacrifice went as far as death.
Isaiah says,
“He was cut off from the land of the living;
For the transgression of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked.”
And the servant's sacrifice was a perfect sacrifice.
Isaiah says, “He had done no violence,
Nor was any deceit in his mouth.”
After the servant's suffering and death,

He is vindicated by God.

Isaiah says,

“Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
And he will divide the spoils with the strong,
Because he poured out his life unto death.”

Well there's a lot more.

But that's enough to give you a flavour
of what Jesus said to Cleopas and his friend.

As Jesus says to Cleopas in verse 26,

“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

You see Cleopas had wrong expectations.

He said to Jesus

that he had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.

But he had the wrong kind of redemption in mind.

He wanted a messiah who wouldn't suffer.

He wanted a messiah who would lead God's people to glory now.

But Jesus tells him,

“No. No. No. There will be glory,

But suffering must come first.

My mission is not just

about rescuing God's people from Roman occupation
and making them a great nation.

My mission is to rescue them from sin and give them eternal life.

And to perform that mission,

I had to die and rise again.”

By giving Cleopas and his friend a Bible Study,

Jesus is doing a few things for them.

First he's helping them to believe the resurrection.

As they read the Scriptures

and see that God's messiah had to die and rise again,

It's going to be easier for them to believe

that the man they believe to be God's messiah has died and risen again.

But it's more than that.

Jesus is also giving them

a way to communicate the resurrection with others

That is just as powerful for other people as it was for them.
As I said earlier,
If you have a resurrection appearance,
It's far more powerful for you than it is for the people you tell about it.
But if Jesus helps you to understand from the OT Scriptures
that he had to die and rise again,
Then there are potentially thousands of other Jews
Who will treat their Scriptures with great reverence,
And may come to believe in the resurrection
with just as much conviction as you do,
If you explain the same things to them as Jesus explained to you.
Jesus is giving Cleopas and his friend a path
whereby not only they can come to believe,
But the early church can take the message to the world.
But it's more indeed than that.
You see for God's plan of salvation to go forward,
It's not enough for Cleopas and his friend
to believe the facts of the resurrection.
They need to know the significance of the resurrection.
"Jesus is alive" is wonderful news for them.
But Jesus has died and risen again,
And his death and resurrection
are what the prophet Isaiah was speaking about.
They provide the basis for the forgiveness of our sins
and the promise of eternal life.
That is more than happy news of a friend restored to life.
It's news that can transform the world.
Can you see that this little Bible Study with Cleopas and his friend
is a crucial interaction?

Can you also see
that it wouldn't have been half so powerful an interaction
if the disciples had recognised Jesus immediately?
In their distress,
Trudging the 11 kilometres to Emmaus,
Cleopas and his friend were looking for answers.

Why?

Why did God allow this terrible thing to happen?

And so as Jesus explains the Scriptures to them,

They can patiently absorb it.

It's giving their hearts a way to make sense of the situation.

And their hearts are crying out for that.

But what would have happened

if they had recognised Jesus straight away?

Well the problem is fixed, isn't it?

Their hearts would no longer be looking for answers.

They have the answer they want already.

Jesus is alive.

But there's a problem.

Their inadequate view of Jesus' mission

would not have been challenged.

They might know that Jesus has risen,

But they wouldn't know why he had to die.

They would be looking for the risen Jesus to give the nation of Israel a privileged place in the world again.

But Jesus has come to do so much more than that.

Recognising Jesus too soon would have deprived them of the possibility of understanding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

It would also have deprived them and us

of the means to communicate the resurrection

to those who haven't had an appearance of the risen Jesus.

Jesus explained to them that he had to die and rise from the Scriptures –

And they could share this perspective with others.

And the people they tell

can be just as powerfully impacted as they were.

God was not playing games with Cleopas and his friend

when he kept them from recognising Jesus.

God was actually helping them to get

a full understanding of the resurrection –

And God was giving them an understanding

they could take to the world.

We live in an anti intellectual age.
Most people today would far rather recognise Jesus' presence with them
when he broke bread,
Than they would have Jesus give them an incognito Bible Study.
Most people would rather have a spiritual experience than understand
something deeply with their minds.
Our children get far more encouragement
to excel on the sports field than they do in the classroom.
If you look back over history,
It swings like a pendulum from valuing the mind to valuing experience.
The ancient Greeks valued the mind greatly
and folk like Aristotle, Plato, Archimedes, Socrates,
they were celebrities in their culture.
Other cultures like ours devalue the mind and yearn for experience.
The Bible does not ask us to choose between the mind and experience.
Jesus didn't disappear when he had finished the Bible Study.
No. He broke bread with them and God allowed them to recognise him.
God works with Cleopas and his friend
both through their minds and through the power of spiritual experience.
When the two of them ran back to Jerusalem and tell the eleven
disciples about what had happened,
What did they tell them?
Verse 35 tells us,
Then the two told what had happened on the way,
And how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.
They told them about the Bible study
and they told them about recognising Jesus.

What is the role of the mind and the role of spiritual experience
in this story?

I've already said that the Bible Study was important
so that the disciples could understand not just the facts
but the significance of Jesus' resurrection.
They needed to understand that the Christ would suffer first
and then be glorified.
They needed to understand

that Jesus came to deal with sin not deal with the Roman army.
The spiritual experience was necessary
to make them get off their behinds
and run 11 kilometres back to Jerusalem.
Working with the mind makes sure that they have got the story straight.
Giving them a spiritual experience
gives them the passion and the energy to tell the story.

Where do we sit?

Well we live in a culture that devalues the mind.

And our culture seeps into the church.

It's difficult today

to get people to have patience with thorough teaching.

But you can imagine the problems that would be caused

By giving a group of Christians a burst of energy to run 11 kilometres
to tell the story that Jesus was going to drive the Romans out of Israel
and restore the Davidic Monarchy.

It's not going to help the gospel go forward one bit.

We do need to value thorough teaching.

But we also are part of a Christian culture
that divides what God designed to be held together.

We have churches that focus all their attention on spiritual experience.

And we have churches

that focus all their attention on instructing the mind.

The churches that focus on spiritual experience
are larger and more successful today.

It's a function of living in a culture

that devalues the mind and elevates experience.

But there's no point just having an instructed mind either.

You can have a thoroughly instructed mind

and not get off your behind and do anything about it.

Cleopas and his friend didn't have the impetus
to share what they had learned from Jesus.

Not until they recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread.

My conclusion is
that we should encourage both learning and spiritual experience.
A church like ours with a minister who leans towards the mind
Must make absolutely sure
that we don't discourage appropriate spiritual experience.
Other churches might need to beware
of devaluing thorough instruction in the Scriptures.
But where ever you are,
Both the mind and spiritual experience are important
if you are going to be effective in serving and following Jesus.

Now I've already fessed up
that my natural tendency is towards the mind.
So how do we as a church
make sure we keep a balance of valuing spiritual experience?
Here are two suggestions.
On Good Friday,
we heard two of our church members, Fiona and Jonathan ,
give personal testimony about the importance of the cross in their lives.
Such personal testimony is a crucial part of our spiritual experience.
It's talking with one another about what God is doing in and through us.
Let me encourage you –
Have personal conversations about how God is at work in your life.
And don't wait for me to ask you –
Volunteer if there's an experience of God at work in your life
that you would like to share with the congregation.
That's the first way we can value spiritual experience more.

Here's my second suggestion.
Prayer is a crucial part of spiritual experience.
We need to be passionate about prayer.
Praying with people after our services when we are able to meet again.
Praying in our 5pm prayer meeting.
You are welcome to join us by Zoom!
Praying at Soul Food when we are able to meet again.
Praying with people you talk to by phone while we are locked down.

Asking people to pray with you and for you
when there is something that is concerning you.

You could say,

“I’m losing sleep over such and such,

I’d really value your prayers.

Would you mind if we prayed about it now?”

And that said,

How about we pray that we would value

both learning the Scriptures well and spiritual experience in our church?