

SERMON: 23 April 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“Road to Emmaus”

Luke 24:13–35

The story of the two travellers on the road to Emmaus is one of the loveliest in scripture. Two ordinary people, people like you and I, are on a journey. They begin the story in despair and end the story finding Jesus.

Luke included this account in his gospel because Cleopas would have been well known to the first generation Christians and was a credible witness. Some scholars believe that Cleopas was the brother of Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, whose son James was later to be one of the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem.

When Jesus, the apparent stranger to them, drew alongside the two, he at first appeared clueless and then displayed his wisdom and understanding by opening up the scriptures from Moses to the present day, eloquent, convincing. He probably spoke to them for about two hours, covering the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Their passion and faith that had been shattered at the cross was being rekindled, they were beginning to burn inside again but they still didn’t know him.

Why did Jesus not just say “Look, it’s me! Here I am raised from the dead!” Jesus did intend that they would recognise him before the day was over but not immediately because he found them to be “foolish” and “slow of heart” and they were not ready to receive the revelation of resurrection. They would have to reach a deeper level of understanding before he revealed himself. After all, they were going to be actively involved in establishing the new church and they needed to know thoroughly who Jesus was and is.

There is a little sense of frustration in Jesus’ tone as he speaks to them. They would have grown up studying the Torah under their local rabbis, they would have heard scripture read and explained as they attended the Synagogue and Temple, they had obviously been following Jesus himself and heard his teaching and witnessed miracles. They knew about the empty tomb and when they later returned to Jerusalem they were able to find the disciples and enter their hiding place, so they were part of that inner circle around the disciples. And yet they still did not get it, the unexpected had happened, Jesus had been put to death and so it must be over.

Before Jesus opened their physical eyes that they would recognise him, he had to open their eyes of faith, he had to reach inside, reach their hearts.

Scripture tells us that we are to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus was about to ascend to his father and he knew that his followers would not see him physically again in this life and all of us who followed over the centuries would not see him physically and so would need to depend on certain eye-witness accounts and the truth of scripture handed down.

Jesus' teaching on the road was a supernatural intervention in order to explain to the two travellers the scriptures they already knew well but had not fully understood. I believe that Jesus still operates in the same way through his holy spirit today. Have you had the experience of reading some verses that you have read or heard many many times and suddenly something completely new jumps out at you, something new is revealed, something makes sense in a totally different way. It might be a phrase or even a single word. I think that God does that. That is why we should pray before we read, that God will reveal what he wants us to know.

The words of an old Methodist hymn come to mind –

**Open my eyes that I might see
Glimpses of truth thou hast for me**

**Silently now I wait for thee, ready my Lord they will to see
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine!**

Clara Scott who wrote the hymn was probably thinking of Psalm 119: 17 & 18 (The Message) –

Be generous with me and I will live a full life; not for a minute will I take my eyes off your road. Open my eyes so I can see what you show me of your miraculous wonders.

Martin Luther, one of the founders of the Reformation questioned “Why is it that some believe, and others do not?” He concluded that we cannot believe by our own reason or strength; it is by the Holy Spirit that one comes to believe. Faith itself is brought about by the supernatural.

As Jesus said (John 15:16) **You did not choose me but I chose you...**

And so through the acting of the Holy Spirit, scripture we have heard or read over and over again in our lifetimes can sometimes take on new meaning and new significance for us.

Incidentally, thinking about repeated verses, some people do not like repetitive songs. Old hymns had choruses that repeated but some modern songs have lines that are repeated, sometimes over and over. We might get impatient, okay, I've got that bit, let's move on! But maybe God just wants us to linger over a thought, an idea, a revelation of who he is, to meditate on a phrase. We are modern, fast-moving people who are used to super fast technology, we don't like to wait more

than two seconds for a web page to upload. Sometimes God wants us to slow right down, so that we don't miss something of his miraculous wonders.

I said earlier that this Emmaus text is about people just like us. It's a text that takes people on the road, going home, back to ordinary life, back to where they were before, who are saddened that their greatest hopes have not come to pass. In spite of all they knew, all the scriptures they had read, in spite of the witness of others, the women and men who had seen the empty tomb, they simply had not seen Jesus himself--nor had anyone else they knew. The prophecies of Jesus and hope of a redeemer grew cold and were not able to sustain them any longer.

Jesus had spoken about rebuilding the temple on the third day but they left Jerusalem when that third day was only half way done. If they had waited a little longer they might have been with Simon when Jesus appeared. Interestingly, I wonder if Jesus was appearing to Simon at the same time as he was walking the Emmaus road with the two friends of Simon!

Cleopas and his companion had begun to suspect that the whole thing had been a mistake, a worthy hope and one unlikely ever to be realized. For them, Good Friday had not been Good. Time had passed and there was no change, no resurrection, no Jesus.

If you have walked away from a grave or the crematorium after the funeral of a loved one then you can imagine how these two people felt. They had lost the one who had filled their lives with hope and love and forgiveness and expectation. The one who loved them and the one they had loved. They had future hopes and plans, what they would accomplish with Jesus, what they would see him do and that has now gone. Time passes, Jesus does not appear, the future looks bleak and disappointing and even hopeless. Things would never be the same again.

Does not time also pass for us, as we go our many ways "back"? We "outgrow" our hopes or become more realistic and we no longer expect anything real to happen. We know the stories. We've maybe heard God speak in a word or a dream or a vision. But little seems to change. We have lost touch with the supernatural God, the all powerful God, the God for whom nothing is impossible.

Like Cleopas and his companion, we talk endlessly. How many library shelves are filled with the words of theologians trying to understand the ways of God and the life of Jesus? Our talk does not always lift our sadness or our lowered expectations of what God could do or would want to do. There is a kind of resignation in all this, both Luke's story as the two walk the road and often our own lives. Get real. Grow up. Back to work. Forget the adventure with Jesus and the dreams of a better future. I can only imagine how the families and friends of Cleopas would offer advice and opinion when the two got home to long untended work and family obligations because remember they hadn't just gone to Jerusalem for the Passover,

they had been Jesus' followers for a year, two years, more.

But the heart of this passage, the place where the dynamic changes, is the meal in Emmaus. They have listened to Jesus explain the scriptures to them. They still don't get it but they are burning with fire inside even when they still did not recognise Jesus. They did recognise something charismatic and exciting about him, they wanted to spend more time in his company, they almost pleaded with him not to go on. "Stay with us...."

The two travellers have to nearly force Jesus to stay with them. The verb (parabiazō) is used only one other time in the New Testament. Luke uses it in Acts 16:15 where Lydia has to practically force Paul and Timothy to stay at her house. The verb means to "twist someone's arm," to "compel." The two were so eager for Jesus to stay with them that they would have almost forced him. But it did not come to that, of course. Jesus' timing was perfect – it was getting towards evening, the road onto the next inn or village would be dark and dangerous, the two travellers could argue with Jesus that he needed to stay with them in a way that would not have worked if Jesus had been there at noon. Jesus was planning to stay the whole time anyway. In fact, Jesus was there the whole time!

By this time I am sure that he was so looking forward to revealing himself to them. Their joy at seeing him would give him great joy just as he knows great joy when we recognise him and acknowledge him.

It was in Jesus' characteristic behaviour of blessing and distributing of bread that they knew him. Suddenly. Fully. They would later look back on this meal and realise that they were present at the first communion after the resurrection and the Lord himself served them. The risen Jesus gave himself to them in this new covenant, this new relationship.

Cleopas and his companion are us. They know a lot. They care a lot. They think about things and are saddened by their diminished hopes. More important, they don't even know that their eyes have been closed until suddenly they are opened. We can't control the One who opens and closes eyes. But from this story, we might find hope that Jesus walks with us.

The bible tells us repeatedly that Jesus is with us always but we don't really grasp that. We say we come into the Lord's house on a Sunday and we meet with the Lord here. It is then too easy to walk out the door and forget about the Lord until our next visit to his house. It is like the Jewish belief that God dwelt in the holiest of holy places in the middle of the Temple. But for the Christian our bodies are the temple and Christ is ever present wherever we go. Like the two travellers, we don't fully get it, we don't live fully in the resurrected Jesus.

If we recognised Jesus with us always, would we not behave differently?

If we recognised Jesus at our right hand, would we still say that we can't complete the task before us or we can't be bothered doing this or that.

If we recognised Jesus at our right hand, would we speak only words of kindness and support rather than hurtful gossipy words about another person?

If we recognised Jesus at our right hand, would we turn on the computer and access pornography?

If we recognised Jesus at our right hand, could we say to our brother or sister that we can never forgive them, when Jesus reminds us that from the cross he forgave those who crucified him and he forgives us all our sins?

If the two travellers had recognised Jesus in the first place they would have been saved a whole lot of heartache and sadness and grief.

If we recognise Jesus with us we will be empowered and strengthened and confident and overflowing with optimism and hope.

In receiving the bread broken for us with thanksgiving, we are given Jesus. So still your hearts, open your eyes to see and your ears to hear. As you reach out to receive what is blessed, you will get a glimpse of the Lord. May that give you new confidence, new hope, even a new way of remembering, a deeper faith. And may you glimpse him often as you journey along life's bumpy road.

I will finish with the words of Ann Voskamp, written for today –

Oh my soul, Come Sunday, come light a candle in an island of quiet, open a window and open the Word and simply listen to the world and the Word.

His Word wraps up wounds.....heals wounds. His Word whispers "You are loved, you are held, you are carried, you are seen, you are heard, you are mine, you are My Beloved and I do not forget or leave you ever."

Amen