

Lent Compline Talks 2019
St Mary's Kidlington

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Lent 3: Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus and is revealed in the breaking of bread.

As you will be aware, to fit in with the focus of the 'making group' on the 'Stations of the Resurrection' in these Lent Complines we are looking at the 'back-story' of the resurrection appearances and, in particular the sense of emptiness and abandonment that must have been felt by all those involved in the period immediately after the crucifixion and until the impact of the resurrection was really grasped. So, what is the 'back-story' of the two people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus in the late evening of the Sunday when the empty tomb had been discovered? And what does it mean for us, in England in the twentieth century?

The earliest version of Mark ends with no reference to the walk to Emmaus, but has the two Marys and Salome fleeing from the empty tomb and a vision there and - terrified - 'they said nothing to anybody because they were afraid'. But, in what appears to be a later addition, the women do tell Peter and his companions; the passage then continues "later that day, Jesus appeared in a different guise to two of his 'sorrowing followers' as they were walking, on their way to the country. These also went and took the news to the others, but again no-one believed them."

Luke has a similar passage with the apostles not believing the women, and then has a longer version of the two men walking from Jerusalem. Luke names Emmaus as their destination, tells us that it is about seven miles from Jerusalem, that the walk was on the same day as the resurrection and that they have heard that the tomb of Jesus was found empty, then gives a lot more detail of the encounter.

Before we get to that, why does Luke specifically mention the name of the village - Emmaus? Emmaus means 'hot springs' and was significant to Jews at the time because, at the battle of Emmaus, Judas Maccabeus was victorious over the Seleucids and gained independence for Palestine for the first time since the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 586BC. This brought peace and ensured the survival of Judaism. Most likely the New Testament Emmaus is the Roman Emmaus Nicopolis, 19 miles from Jerusalem.

Luke names only one of the two walkers (Cleopas - short for Cleopatros - Greek for 'the glory of the father' (we're more familiar with the female form - Cleopatra!). [One early source (AD180) suggests that Cleopas was the brother of Joseph, husband of Mary]. The two were not clearly one of the eleven disciples because, after their encounter with the risen Christ, they promptly walked back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven. This implies that there were many other people (including the women we discussed last Sunday) who were part of 'Jesus movement' - indeed later they refer to the women as "of our company".

Luke's account starts prosaically enough. Any two people who'd been through the events of the passion would have been talking as they walked. Furthermore, no surprise that they are said to have been "in deep gloom". Perhaps also no surprise that another walker joined them, en route from Jerusalem. The stranger who they do not recognise asks them what they are talking about. At this, the two stop - totally surprised, and Cleopas says sadly "Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all that has happened recently? Jesus of Nazareth - a powerful prophet of God, acclaimed by the whole people, was handed over by the chief priests and rulers to be sentenced to death and was crucified". So, the end of all their hopes - all crumbled to dust.

But what exactly were they hoping for? Cleopas continues "We were hoping that he was the man to *liberate* Israel". This 'liberation' is not explained. One possibility is that - like the zealots - they were hoping that Jesus would lead some sort of movement that would liberate

Israel from the Romans - simple nationalistic fervour. This was clearly widespread at the time, as the Jewish revolts against the Romans during the next 40 years demonstrate. For pious Jews (and it seems likely that the two walkers were in this category) the 'liberation' might be to allow pious Jews to follow their temple worship without let or hindrance, although it seems that, provided it did not lead to civil unrest, the Romans were willing to let the Jewish priesthood run things their way. It's also possible that, having witnessed Jesus 'cleansing of the temple', they were hoping for a new and purer form of Jewish worship. We shall never know - whatever their hopes and whatever the liberation they hoped for, all was now desolation and gloom. Maybe they didn't even look carefully at the man who joined them - they certainly weren't expecting the resurrection.

After hearing Cleopas recount the recent events, the man who joins them rebukes them for their unbelief and explains the prophecies about the Messiah to them. But, still they have no idea who he is despite the fact that he says 'How dull you are and slow to believe all that the prophets said. That the Messiah was bound to suffer before being glorified'. Could they have thought he was one of the priests, well versed in scripture? Or maybe they were just too sunk in gloom to care one way or another! What did it matter - it was all over anyway! Even Jesus body had disappeared!

On reaching Emmaus and either their house or an inn, the stranger was apparently about to continue on his journey, but, with typical Jewish hospitality, they pressed him "Stay with us, for evening draws on and the day is almost over". Sound advice because, as you will remember from one of Jesus' parables about the man who 'fell among thieves' as he walked from Jerusalem to Jericho and was tended by a Samaritan, the country roads were pretty dangerous at that time. So the stranger went in to stay with them.

Presumably some time later, after food had been prepared or served and the necessary ablutions had taken place such as foot washing after dusty road, the stranger sat down at table with them. Then we read "He took bread and said the blessing" - perhaps still no surprise - that would have happened at every meal, and maybe from their previous conversation on the road they thought the stranger might be some sort of priest. But then in what seems a complete reversal of etiquette he, the guest, offered the broken bread to his hosts, Cleopas and his companion. And it is then, we read that "their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he vanished from their sight".

Difficult to imagine the shock of that! But the shock clearly jolted them out of their misery and into their senses because they then recalled how the stranger had explained the scriptures to them, and that this 'set their hearts on fire'. So, without a moment's delay they retrace the long journey back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven assembled together, but arriving there Luke tells us the disciples said "It's true, the Lord has risen, he has appeared to Simon (Peter)". There's some uncertainty here, because Luke's gospel makes no other mention of an appearance to Simon Peter. Be that as it may, Cleopas and his companion then told their own story of their encounter with the risen Jesus.

What are we to learn from this passage, with all its uncertainties? There will be many times in our own lives when we build up very high hopes for this or that event or outcome in the future, and perhaps invest our hopes in some other person or persons, whether as leader or friend. We do this personally and as a nation - witness the current political scene! Because those hopes and expectations are built so high, when they are not realised, and perhaps dashed in the most cruel way, we too can sink to the depths of despair, and not be able to understand or accept what is being explained to us. What the Emmaus appearance tells us is that, however low we may feel, however confused and downhearted we may be about the future, like Cleopas and his friend, we can discover our risen Lord afresh and our own way forward and have 'our hearts set on fire' in the breaking of bread at communion, Sunday by Sunday.