

Focus scripture: Luke 24:13–35

Last week Rod spoke about the account in John's gospel where Doubting Thomas says he can't believe Jesus has been raised from the dead unless he sees the nail marks in his hands and side.

Today's passage is again about the struggles with belief about the resurrection and experiencing the risen Lord with us. But it is also about a journey from fear and despair to faith and hope.

What are you fearful of? What do you despair about? How can you find faith and hope?

In Luke 24 we have two disciples – Cleopas and perhaps his wife – who are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, talking over the events of the preceding days and the puzzling story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden. They are sad, disappointed, and confused. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, come to bring political deliverance for Israel.

Maybe not dressed as a doctor, with glowing hands and with war planes buzzing overhead – but still a victorious Messiah who dealt with his enemies.

As they walk along, Jesus comes near them, but they do not recognize him. He asks about their conversation, and they tell him the story of the previous week in Jerusalem. Jesus unpacks for them the Hebrew Scriptures – stories of Moses and the prophets that tell how the Messiah must suffer in order to bring about God's plan for salvation.

When they reach Emmaus, the two urge Jesus to stay with them because it is almost evening. Jesus has a meal with them. Though he is the guest, he takes the role of host – blessing and breaking the bread, and giving it to them. The table is the place where these two disciples came to know Jesus more deeply. Jesus vanishes, and the two return to Jerusalem to share their joy with the others.

They have made a journey from fear and despair to faith and hope. What has helped them in that journey?

First thing is they had someone come alongside them.

It is so important to belong in a community and being part of a supportive network of friends. Church can offer that – if you buy into it and take the courage to open yourself up to meeting and sharing with others.

There is a billion pound industry out there telling you to stay at home and watch the latest from Netflix or go on holiday by yourselves and just seek pleasure – no strings attached enjoyment. Being part of a committed community is costly. You will rub up people the wrong way, you will have disagreements and fall outs, you will have the hard

work of making a contribution to the group, spending time with others. It's the price of community. But hopefully the price is worth paying because there is someone alongside you. You are not on your own. Together you can support each other: laugh and cry together.

These two disciples, Cleopas and his partner, are depressed, downcast and despondent. Things change when a stranger comes alongside them.

The Emmaus story of course is focused on the companionship of Jesus and the difference of it makes when Jesus walks alongside us.

In the King James Version of the Bible, the invitation of the two travellers for Jesus to stay with them for the evening reads, "Abide with me; for it is toward evening and the day is far spent," words which were the inspiration for that beloved hymn, "Abide with me/Fast falls the eventide."

The hymn was written by Henry Francis Lyte, for 25 years the vicar of the parish at Devonshire, England. He was 54 years old, broken in health and saddened by dissensions in his congregation. On Sunday, September 4, 1847 he preached his farewell sermon and went home to rest. After tea in the afternoon, he retired to his study. In an hour or two, he rejoined his family, holding in his hand the manuscript of his immortal hymn.

Despite what most think, Lyte's "eventide" has nothing to do with the end of the natural day but rather the end of life. "Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day/Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away." The words are about the faith that faces life and death fearlessly and triumphantly in the light of the cross and the empty tomb....East of Easter. Thus Lyte could conclude, "Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee/In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me." Lyte died three months later.

If we have known the abiding presence of Jesus we will have transformed lives. When the truth of the gospel grabs you, your eyes are opened to see God's love and God's ways. Your heart burns.

Second thing that helps us move from despair to hope, from doubt to faith and to know the presence of Jesus, is when the Spirit makes our hearts burn. When we hear something that is true and right, we feel it deep down - there is a kind of bodily resonance that occurs. We even respond with the words, "that really moved me." Luke here in this passage refers to this as heart burn:

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Do you know the Spirit working in your heart bringing you heart burn, a conviction of truth, a word from the Lord...?

Obviously we don't have the physical presence of Jesus with us now. Christians believe we have the spiritual presence of Jesus with us. How do we know the spiritual presence? How does Christ abide with us today?

Through prayer, through the scriptures, through fellowship, through worship, sharing in bread and wine, through the Spirit moving in our hearts.

Its is all here in this story.

When Jesus drew near Cleopas and his partner walking on the road to Emmaus, they were despondent and downcast. They called Jesus only a prophet not the Messiah, because whilst they had followed him they saw him get crucified and therefore thought he was not who he said he was – a failed messiah, their hopes dashed.

Jesus said, 'how foolish you are'. Usually in the bible when people are called fools it has to do with them denying there is a God or being sceptical that God is at work for good in the world and they lose hope. (e.g. Ps 14.1; Luke 12.20)

Jesus explains from the scriptures God's plan and turns their attitudes and mood around.

Opening the scriptures, opening your heart, praying them through.

Prayer is the key. Prayer is being still and centring on the presence of Christ.

Many of you use the Lectio 365 app for your morning prayer. It's a great resource set up by Pete Greig from the 24/7 Prayer movement. In Pete Greig's book *How to Pray: a simple guide for normal people* he describes how once a dark cloud of despair descended upon him one morning when he became inexplicably and overwhelmingly fearful about the future. I know many of you may be in that position, worried about your jobs or your career prospects or your relationships or your health.

Pete said that he realised that although this feeling was very powerful it may not be true. He reached for his Bible and found Jeremiah 29.11 and began to read it.

¹¹For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart

Instead of just reading this verse and thinking 'how nice', he felt challenged to take this promise seriously and apply it to his situation.

‘I choose to believe that the Lord has a plan for my life and that he’s in charge! I refuse to panic. I’m not going to be afraid. I reject the lie that I’m continually missing out, that everyone else is moving ahead. That I’m getting left behind.’

His mind turned to Romans 8.1

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

‘Get off my back Satan!’ he cried. ‘I can see what you’re trying to do and I’m not giving in. Stop accusing me. Stop lying to me. I’m seated in the heavenly realms with Christ. He’s on my side. I’m not going to feel guilty or ashamed. I’m clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Get lost!’

He found his mood changing as a result of this prayerful resistance. One of the reasons to spend time regularly in scripture is to sharpen the sword as they say – St Paul described the word of God as the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.14). When God speaks to you through his word it’s not just to bring solace to your soul and light to your path but to arm you with the truth you desperately need for the fight of your life.ⁱ

Opening the scriptures, praying them through.

It’s easy to forget how much control we actually have over our minds. The 20th-century preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, *“Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”*ⁱⁱ

Our tendency is to let our minds run where they want with a constant stream of thoughts. But Lloyd-Jones points out that the psalmist’s response was usually to talk back, to refuse to allow his “self” to dictate his thought life. Three times, in Psalms 42 and 43, he asks himself, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?” Then instructs himself: “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”

Talking to yourself isn’t a sign of madness, it’s a sign of wisdom. You get to choose, whether to be discontented with your lot, or whether to trust in, lean on and praise your Saviour and your God. Which will you choose today?

Which narrative will you choose?

Then there is fellowship and the breaking of bread.

Jesus left the broken bread on the table. Slipping away, that was the evidence they had really seen what they had seen. It was not the only evidence. Their hearts had been burning within them as Jesus expounded the long Biblical story of God showing humanity how God is with us and how it reached its climax in his resurrection.

Luke, the writer of this gospel, first encountered the Christian way in the church he describes in Acts. This community that broke bread and lived with an uncanny lack of fear of Rome drew him in. Then he used his literary talent to synthesize the memories and stories of Jesus that tumbled around. He gave us Luke-Acts.

The Gospel is shaped in order to make sense of the community he discovered and became a part of. It builds up to a Eucharistic climax – bread is broken.

In turn, the community he was drawn into only makes sense if Jesus rose from the dead. In the book of Acts, summarizing the church Luke joined and then wrote for, he writes this about their practice:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2.42-47

Their three habits are study of the apostles' teaching, breaking bread and praying for the world.

There were plenty of reasons for people to stand still looking sad; plenty of reasons for networks to fragment. The empire, built on power, force and might had crucified Jesus the preacher of non-violence and love for God and neighbour. The empire seems to have won.

But from locked room to public square something energizing has happened. The resurrection has happened.

Recognizing Jesus energizes the two disciples, and they hurry back to re-join the fellowship. Delightfully, their hope is corroborated by the others who share their hope before they can get their words out.

In the equally threatening world today, the three simple disciplines will keep us hopeful and generous:

Firstly, the apostle's teaching/opening the scriptures about how the world ticks is more authoritative than any earthly regime or powerful empire that tries to capture the narrative – just make sure who captures your attention – which is why the Bible is a dangerous book and the rest of the world is out to discredit it.

In my Tab Matters letter this week I quoted from

— **Brian Zahnd**, [Postcards from Babylon: The Church In American Exile](#) writes this:

“It’s not the task of the church to “Make America Great Again.” The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity countercultural again. And once we untether Jesus from the interests of empire, we begin to see just how countercultural and radical Jesus’ ideas actually are. Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it. Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Sinners? Forgive them. These are the kind of radical ideas that will always be opposed by the principalities and powers, but which the followers of Jesus are called to embrace, announce, and enact. And the degree to which the church is faithful to Jesus and his radical ideas is the degree to which the church embodies a faith that is truly countercultural.”

Secondly - the subversive breaking of bread to remember Jesus keeps reasserting our inter-dependence when so much would propel us apart and that God provides and works for justice in the world;

Thirdly we are called to pray generously for all who would harm, all who would lead, all who seek to control the narrative and all who hang their heads in despair.

Cleopas and his friend shifted from scarcity to abundance of hope, from fear and despair to faith – hearts burning, eyes opened to God’s reality, all because of that broken bread. It’s still on the table today.

ⁱ Pete Greig, How to Pray, Hodder, 2019, p186-87

ⁱⁱ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/5-ways-to-fight-for-contentment-during-lockdown>