

NEW SERIES: EASTER MIRACLES IN PROCESS

PART 3 - THE LONG ROAD TO EMMAUS - Luke 24: 13-35

It was Sunday morning following Silent Saturday and Good Friday. No one in Jerusalem knew those days by those titles. That would come years later. To those who were followers of Jesus it had been the longest three days of their lives and now total resignation had settled in. *It's all over* was the common thought. Doing their due diligence a group of women led by Mary Magdalene, Joanna and one of the other "Mary's," went to the tomb to bring fresh spices for the body. To their surprise the large rock (think *boulder*) was no longer in place. The tomb entrance was open. Bravely they ventured inside and to their shock the tomb was empty. Jesus was no longer in the grave.

Luke 24 tells us "they were puzzled, wondering what to make of this. Then out of nowhere it seemed, two men, light cascading over them, stood in their presence. Awestruck, the women bowed down in a position of worship. The men said: *Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, He is raised up. Remember how He told you when you were still back in Galilee He had to be handed over to sinners, be killed on a cross, and in three days rise up?* Then they remembered Jesus' words."

Joy, albeit joy combined with lingering confusion and some amount of shock, propelled them to tell the Disciples, who promptly dismiss the women, *not believing a word of it, accusing them of making these things up*. Luke reports: *But Peter jumped to his feet and ran to the tomb. He stooped to look in and saw a few grave clothes, that's all. He walked away puzzled, shaking his head*. And this is Peter, Peter of three-denials-of-Jesus fame. He obviously wanted, even needed it to be true, but rather than accept Truth, he settled for even more confusion.

That same day two people were leaving Jerusalem on a seven mile walk to the village of Emmaus. We know the name of one of them, Cleopas, but his traveling partner is unnamed. Together they leave Jerusalem struggling to reconcile the unsettling events of the weekend. What they saw and heard over the course of two days was in contrast with everything they believed about the man Jesus. The language structure utilized by Luke indicates they weren't chatting or making small talk to pass the time on the long walk back to Emmaus – they were

“examining evidence” together. They were asking many of the same questions being asked by Peter, Thomas, and countless others.

He was our long-awaited Messiah but now he is dead.

He proclaimed the coming of God’s Kingdom, but look around, nothing has changed.

We heard him say Israel would be restored and the Holy Land would become holy once more, but we fear Rome now more than ever.

These two were not alone in their confusion and disillusionment about how their Jesus-lives had seemingly died with Jesus. Nothing had turned out the way they had been expecting. Jesus as their Messiah would make Rome suffer, not suffer himself at the hands of Rome. So, Cleopas and his companion walk and talk and try to make some sense of the horrible tragedy that was their faith in Jesus. This wasn’t a pity party. These were two committed followers of Jesus who could not comprehend the how’s or why’s of the past two days. So, in the vortex between full resignation and total heartbreak, they leave for Emmaus, pondering what tomorrow might look like.

This is what Good Friday looks like without Easter Sunday

As they walk and talk a stranger approaches them. He too is going in the direction of Emmaus and he ambles up to them (they were walking very slowly) and joins them on their journey. There is an amazing theological insight/reality at this point in the story: Jesus approaches them, not the other way around, and commentators believe He had to slow His speed in order to meet them when He did. This is how God works. Jesus sought the original disciples; they did not seek him. In theology this is called prevenient grace. A.W. Tozer, in his book *The Pursuit of God*, describes it this way: *Before a person can seek God, God must first seek the person.* This encounter was no accident. It was ordained.

A question that must be asked is this: How did Cleopas and his companion not recognize Jesus? They were his followers, so they had to be familiar with his face and his voice. Did his resurrection form render him unrecognizable? Some commentators say they were *divinely blinded* by God, rendering them unable to recognize the stranger for who he was. Luke 24:16 in the New International Version reads: *But they were kept from recognizing him.* The Message Bible is

similar: *But they were not able to recognize who he was.* These two travelers had no idea that *this* particular walk to Emmaus would become the new and established path to seeing Jesus as the prophesized Messiah, not a Messiah created by the felt need of Israel. Jesus' main following at his death were Jews who saw him as the redeemer of Israel; the promised Davidic Messiah who would defeat the enemies of God and restore Israel to its rightful place. The actual Messianic prophesies had been at worst, ignored, and at best, conveniently set-aside to make room for a *here and now* deliverer. And now he is dead. He could not have been the Messiah. God would not allow the Messiah to die. He would make Rome suffer, not suffer at the hands of Rome. And this is the crux of the Israel's existential issue: They could not comprehend the *suffering-servant* Messiah despite clear prophetic writings, but now it doesn't matter, he's dead.

Some days Emmaus is a very long walk.

This particular road was a bandit's paradise and would have been especially dangerous on the heels of a Hebrew holy week. Cleopas and his companion were so deeply focused on the world-tilting events of the weekend they did not notice the stranger until he inserted himself into their conversation. They were, of course, deeply enmeshed in dialogue about all that had taken place.

Amy Butler describes their emotional and spiritual state this way:

If we think the day to day details of our lives are overwhelming, imagine what it felt to be like them on that Sunday morning. They had just lived through a week of utter trauma, where someone they knew and loved had been tortured and killed. Their city was in political turmoil; their own futures, given their association with Jesus, were uncertain. Next steps for a movement in which they had placed all their hopes for their future were unclear and uncertain.

Jesus, in the guise of a stranger, steps (literally) into their shock, grief and utter confusion with the simple words: "What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?" The Passion Translation reads this way: "You seem to be in a deep discussion about something. What are you talking about, so sad and gloomy?" Luke describes their countenances as "long-faced, like they had lost their best friend" (24:17b). In a way they had lost their best friend and their best hope for the future of Israel and Judaism. Cleopas emerges from his funk to reply, "Are you

the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?"

I can imagine him thinking: *What? You were in Jerusalem and missed it? You obviously did fall off the turnip truck last night!* Jesus-incognito responds, "What has happened?" And off they go on what will become the defining corrective theological exchange of all time (and yes, that's saying a lot). Cleopas lays it out for the stranger:

The things about Jesus, the Man from Nazareth, He was a mighty prophet of God who performed miracles and wonders. His words were powerful and he had great favor with God and the people. But three days ago the high priest and rulers of the people sentenced him to death and had him crucified. We all hoped that he was the one who would redeem and rescue Israel. Early this morning, some of the women informed us of something amazing. They claimed two angels appeared and told them that Jesus is now alive. Some of us went to see for ourselves and found the tomb exactly like the women said. But no one has seen him.

Cleopas' explanation demonstrated the majority view of the role of the Messiah. It is conceivable that there were followers who fully expected Jesus to resurrect, but it would be difficult to name anyone listed in the Passion narrative. It's clear Peter and Thomas did not see Jesus as being God-Incarnate despite witnessing multiple actions and events demonstrating that reality. John, the self-described "favorite" of Jesus, does not seem to be expecting the resurrection. Mary, Mary and Joanna went to the burial site to treat the body with fresh spices and were surprised, even perplexed by the empty tomb. It took a celestial explanation for them to believe Jesus defeated death (Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery?) When they rushed to tell the disciples they were met with: *What? We don't believe a word of this; you're making it up.* And these were the eleven disciples! If they didn't see this coming, who would?

With pretty much everyone connected with Jesus missing the point entirely Jesus uses this conversation to course-correct. There is so much to unlearn, and to let go of, but this process had to begin at some place, with someone, and God chose two downtrodden travelers to reclaim Messianic theology for all who follow, even Gentile followers two millennia forward. It was time to see the promised Messiah

through the lens of the prophets, and through the teachings of Jesus, the actual Messiah. Jesus, still in the guise of the stranger, begins the lesson, albeit a bit harshly:

Why are you so thick-headed? Why do you find it so hard to believe every word the prophets have spoken? Wasn't it necessary for Christ, the Messiah, to experience all these sufferings and then afterward to enter into his glory? Then he carefully unveiled the revelation of himself throughout the Scripture. He started from the beginning and explained the writings of Moses and all the prophets, showing how they wrote of him and revealed the truth about himself (24:25-27).

As Jesus finished his teaching they were in Emmaus. Time flies when you are unwittingly talking theology with the person who *invented* Theology. Jesus had partially opened their eyes and souls to the amazing lack of knowledge they, and most everyone else, held about Israel's Messiah. Roy Harrell describes *limited-version-theology* when he writes:

There was obviously a limited view of theology that had been taught to most Jews at the time of Christ. And this viewpoint, especially as it pertained to the Messiah was flawed enough to keep people from recognizing Jesus as the manifestation of the Messiah. The whole nation had a limited, flawed theology of the Messiah because they camped out on some doctrines and dismissed others that did not mesh with their chosen theology. They had hoped Jesus was the Christ but when he was crucified it destroyed that hope, because they had been taught that the Messiah would bring about a political, social and spiritual change that would result in Him overturning Rome and taking the throne of David in Jerusalem. This was what they had been taught in the synagogues and by the priests.

Apparently, Jesus was in the process of dismissing class for the day when Cleopas and his companion asked Him to share a meal with them:

"Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening: the day is done." So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared (24:28-31)

Poof, He was gone. Course-correction accomplished. Adequate unlearning accomplished. Now amazingly open to the “whole counsel” of God’s word rather than their chosen, comfortable and convenient “limited-view?” Absolutely. How do we know this? Luke tells us in verse 32: *Back and forth they talked. “Didn’t we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the scriptures for us?”*

Cleopas and his companion are microcosmically Israel. Simply stated, Israel had issues with the notion of a suffering-servant Messiah. Isaiah 53 and many other prophetic writings depict a Messiah who suffers, not one who assumes an earthly Davidic-style position. Their theology of the Messiah focused heavily on dealing with Rome. God’s Messianic plan focused exclusively on reconciliation and salvation. The former could be accomplished by a mere human. The latter could only be accomplished by God Himself. And, it would take a lot of suffering, brokenness and pain to provide salvation and reconciliation. And, here’s the sticky part: it also takes suffering, brokenness and pain to fully live into God’s salvation.

First century Israel had trouble with the suffering-servant Messiah; today we have trouble when followers of Jesus suffer. The common denominator spanning a few thousand years? Suffering. Yet, suffering is the main ingredient in salvation.

Jesus suffered, was broken and died to provide salvation for humankind

We are asked to die to the natural life and arise to a new life in Christ

There is no salvation without dying and suffering. We won’t, even can’t connect with the actual, Biblical Messiah until we stop seeing suffering and brokenness as punishment, or something that is grossly unfair. Jesus hung around the evening meal long enough to do two things: First, he blessed the bread; and second, he broke it. On the Thursday before he sought the father’s blessing before being broken himself, literally broken, the following day. It is in being broken that we find the actual Biblical Christ. It is in being broken that we find the actual Messiah.

Father Richard Rohr says this better than I can:

Sooner or later, the heart of everybody's spiritual problem is "What do we do with our pain? Why is there suffering?" Jesus becomes the answer in his own passion, death and resurrection. Sooner or later, life going to lead us (as it did Jesus) into the belly of the beast, into a situation that we can't fix, can't control, and can't explain or understand. That's where transformation most easily happens. God uses tragedy, suffering, pain, betrayal, and death itself, not to wound or punish us, but to bring us to a larger identity.

That larger identity are people of the post-Easter world who can, and do, deal with brokenness and suffering because it's part of the Easter-drill; *it is* the salvation drill. Neither brokenness nor suffering is our enemy. Jesus defeated brokenness and suffering on the Cross, and in the Resurrection. Each are our path to transformation and our regular reminder of proper theology.

Paul had this figured out when he penned:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body, for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

Takeaways:

1. Over time, accepting anything less than the complete Jesus will stifle the progress of God's plans: It was imperative Israel accept and embrace a suffering Messiah. Salvation could not have come to God's creation in any other form. The equation of *sin to salvation* has always required suffering as its catalyst.
2. Like it or not, suffering refines us, instructs us, and is where our strongest transformation occurs. The very-very-good days bring with them the temptation to coast and to become more self-reliant than we should ever become. Then up pops a very-very-bad day (or season) and we are not as spiritually prepared to deal with the darker changes. There is much less transformation on the good, calm days, as there is on the *long walk to Emmaus* days.

3. We cannot and must not repeat the mistakes of first-century Israel by embracing some scripture while ignoring others, all in the pursuit of making following Jesus easier and more convenient.

So, suffering and being broken is O.K. There is no shame in suffering and there is great benefit from being broken. Jesus breaking the bread and immediately disappearing from Emmaus is a sermon in itself. Breaking the bread; breaking his body; us being broken, all lead to the transformation it took for slow learners like Peter, John and Thomas to step up to Pentecost and beyond.

And as we break a unique divine healing takes place. The cracked places will remain, it's God's design. We can be healed – but we will carry the scars.

Leonard Cohen wrote: There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. To Mr. Cohen I would say: *Sir, that is also how the light gets out.*

*There's a crack in everything and everyone. That's how the light enters (Rumi).
Master Rumi: The light also shines out for the world to see.*

Brokenness transforms us and the divine light emanating from the cracks proclaim healing to the world.

Sarah Thebarg sums it up this way: Our bodies and our souls and our hearts break as we go through life. The promise we have from God is not that we won't break, but that when we do, God will redeem the brokenness – or in the words of Romans 8:28, *work all things for good.*

This is what it's like to live in the Post-Easter world

As you walk in the post-Easter world, remember that God brought you into the world with love. He holds you and speaks a blessing over you. And then he will allow you to be broken. And as God redeems your pain, you will be transformed, and your transformation can change the world...and this is what makes us Easter miracles.

Amen and Amen

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