

A Word from Cleopas

Luke 24:13-35

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It's been years since we walked down that road trying to escape the crowds in Jerusalem, a long time since we met that stranger on a dusty street. People still say to me, "Cleopas, tell us the story again." They love to hear how he appeared to us that day, so I tell the story, but I say, "Telling the story is good, but breaking the bread is better."

I think some people find the story amusing, a tale they can tell on old Cleopas. They ask me, "Didn't you feel like an idiot when you found out who it was?" They want to laugh a bit, that's all right, but I have to tell them, with my heart warm all over again, "No, I didn't feel put down for a second. I felt like the luckiest man alive. I felt like the clouds parted and the sun broke through and was shining on me."

The way things have turned out, it may be hard for you to imagine how dark it was that day. I don't mean the weather. The sun was out, but my buddy and I were walking on the shadow side of the street. We didn't know where to go or who to turn to, but we knew we wanted to get out of Jerusalem. There was nothing left for us there. We didn't even want to see the other followers who were back there. They just reminded us of what had happened.

Have you ever really had your hopes up? You were *sure* the girl would marry you, you knew you had clinched that job, you had a great idea for a business—and then it all came to nothing? It was worse than that for us. We weren't just let down by a big mistake. We felt we'd been let down by God. Some people think it's sad to live without hope. But let me tell you, it's worse to *have* hope—to be swept up and consumed by that hope—and then to lose it.

Some of these youngsters nowadays who didn't live through that week in Jerusalem, they think we must have lacked faith. Ha! Our problem was that we were true believers. We believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the one. He was a prophet who spoke a word from God and did all kinds of miracles; we were sure that he was the Messiah who would set our nation free. We just wanted to be free. We could taste it, it was so close. Looking back, we can see how we were caught up in the spirit of the times. But our problem was not a lack of faith or hope. Our problem was that our faith and hope were not aimed at the right thing. We had this image of Christ in our minds and we expected Jesus to fit that image. But Jesus just didn't fit our image of Christ. He surprised us. Still does.

So you want the story, right? OK, we were walking down the road to Emmaus, not much of a street in those days, not much of a town. We mainly wanted to walk away from the capital and all that had happened in the city. It had been the most disastrous Passover that ever was—a celebration of freedom it was supposed to be, but it was a disaster, our dreams of freedom gone with the wind. That's what we were: disaster victims, as surely as if a flood had washed our homes away or an earthquake had collapsed a tower on our faith. So we were talking about this, my buddy and I, asking how God could have allowed this to happen to us—how he could have allowed this to happen to Jesus, such a great guy, now dead and buried. All we talked about was the past. For us there was no present, no future. Time had stopped on Friday.

Now it was Sunday, the third day, and as we walked down the road this stranger came walking beside us. He heard us talking and he came closer to us, like he was curious or maybe lonely. You're probably wondering why we didn't recognize him. My answer is that *God* kept us

from recognizing him—for his own reasons. Maybe so he could teach us from the Scriptures. Maybe so we could learn something about recognizing him.

This is what we learned: that anytime you see Jesus it's a gift. I mean you don't go out looking for him and find him because you're so ingenious or persistent. It didn't work that way for any of us. He chooses to reveal himself to us and it's only then that you see him. You can be staring him in the face—or looking right through him—but he's the one who throws the switch and suddenly you see.

Anyway, this stranger says, "What are you two talking about?" Frankly, we're talking about all this stuff, but we really don't want to talk about it, you know what I mean? Certainly not to a stranger. So we stop in our tracks. I turn to him—and I'm a little annoyed, I admit it—and I say to him: "Where have you been? In a cave? Where are you from? Are you the only person around who doesn't know the things that have been happening in Jerusalem the past few days?" And the stranger says, "What things?"

My buddy and I kind of roll our eyes and we both answer together, "The things that happened to Jesus of Nazareth." We think this guy must be out of it, but we want to be kind—we learned that much from Jesus—so we try to explain it to him. How great Jesus was, how our own religious leaders turned him over to the Romans—the enemies—so he could be executed, and how they put him to death on the cross. Once we started, we couldn't stop; we let it out and told this stranger how our *hopes* had died there too. "And now it's the third day, when the body is absolutely permanently cold, and something else cruel and confusing has happened," we said. "Some of our women went to the tomb and couldn't find the body. They said an angel told them he was alive. Fat chance. Some of the men went to the tomb and it was empty, all right, but they didn't see Jesus."

Then the stranger really surprised us. He's supposed to give us sympathy, but he says, "How foolish you are!" He's got a lot of nerve. Then he called us "slow of heart." I'll never forget that. He didn't say that we were dim-witted or hard-hearted. He said that our hearts were slow, as if we weren't nimble enough, not quick enough to adjust to a new reality, as if our hearts were hanging back in the past when the future was upon us.

The stranger said we were slow to believe *all* the prophets had spoken. We thought at the time that we *did* believe the prophets. We believed the stuff about the coming Messiah and God's kingdom of power and glory. But the stranger told us that the prophets also spoke of suffering. He said that it was God's plan for the Messiah to suffer, even to die, and then to enter his glory. Nobody ever taught us that in synagogue school. That wasn't the way I was raised at all. But this stranger—we figured he was a rabbi—started going through the Scriptures showing us how the idea of the suffering Messiah had been in God's mind all along.

It was amazing how fast this all happened. One minute we were being the teachers, condescending to him in his ignorance, and the next minute he's teaching us things we never heard of and we're eating it up. Everything began to change for us when we saw that maybe Jesus *was* the Messiah after all. Maybe what happened was not a disaster but God's plan. As we thought about it later, my buddy and I realized that when the stranger taught us from the Scriptures it was like it opened up to us for the first time, and we felt a fire burning in our hearts. After all these years, it's still that way. Sometimes I hear the Scriptures and my heart starts to burn and I know it's him, speaking to me again.

By the time we got to Emmaus to my buddy's little house in the suburbs, it was late in the afternoon. It was starting to get dark. But the stranger seemed to be going farther down the road.

By this time we were fascinated, so we begged him, “Please have supper with us and stay the night.”

So he came into the house. What happened there I can’t really explain. He was our guest, but when we sat down at the table we immediately felt that he was the host. He was there to serve us. He picked up the bread—it was just everyday bread, mind you—and he said the blessing: “Blessed are you, King of the universe, who brings forth grain from the earth,” and broke the bread into pieces and gave it to us. Something I’d seen my father do all his life, but this time it felt different. Maybe it was a *déjà vu*.

What I do know is that we didn’t figure it out for ourselves. It was he who opened our eyes. All of a sudden as he gave us the bread we saw who he really was. This was no stranger. This was Jesus, the one who had died, here at our table, sharing our bread. That hope which had started to burn within us when we heard the Scriptures now rocketed to the sky. The one we had hoped in was not dead at all. If he was alive again, then everything was still possible: the Messiah’s kingdom, victory over evil, everything. If God had raised Jesus from the dead, then we could believe again that God is good, God is powerful, and the real God is the one Jesus taught us about.

What we saw when he broke the bread was that the one we loved was still with us. As we reached out to touch him he disappeared. I’m telling you he was real, not some ghost, but we couldn’t hold him. One time he told us, “God’s breath is like the wind. You don’t know where it comes from, you don’t know where it goes, but you feel it and you know he’s there.” Death couldn’t hold him and neither could we. But in his freedom he makes himself known.

After all these years, it seems like yesterday. Because that wasn’t the last time we saw him. No it was just the beginning. Sometimes when we read the Scriptures, there he is beside us. Sometimes when we gather around the table, our eyes get opened all over again and there he is. Like I said, I don’t mind telling the story. Telling the story is good, but breaking the bread is better.