

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt Burleson

“Back on the Road to Emmaus”

Luke 24: 13-35

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Luke begins his gospel by telling us why he's writing all this down. He's the only one... The others just get to it. Luke spells out his aim, which is to help a guy named Theophilus know the certainty of things he has been taught.

“Lots of folks have done this,” he wrote. **“They’ve tried to write down faithfully what the eyewitnesses told us. And since I’ve done a little investigative work myself, it only made sense that I try my hand at it, most excellent Theophilus so that you might have some confidence in all this.”**

Though, Luke alone spells it out, that's really the agenda of all the gospel writers. They want us to believe. And they take us on a ride with Jesus and we wind up standing before an empty tomb in the end. And then, always on the last page, we see Jesus, the Risen Lord appearing to his followers.

The unspoken challenge to all of us is to believe in something that is radically different than what reality appears to be. The pages of papyrus get flipped over... you're at the end of the story and the story is saying, **“Okay, you gonna believe this?”**

Easter confronts you and requires that you leap. It's not simply about affirming something true in the human spirit... or about butterflies in the spring... or about Jesus living on in the memory of his loved ones.

The claim is...

There was this dead body... in a closed tomb...

And God did something...

And the lungs in that body filled with air...

A heart began beating...

The eyes opened and fluttered...

That body belonged to Jesus and the disciples saw him and talked to him and told people and they wrote it down and now you're reading it and the question is, **“Do you believe this? It comes down to this.”**

As Paul would later say, **“If Christ be not raised, we may as well go play golf on Sundays.”** (The Really Living Bible translation)

It's not an easy sell, is it?

The first time the disciples heard it... before they saw... they said it was “nonsense”... and it is... It does not make any good sense by our rational standards but... that’s the story and it ends wanting us all to make a leap beyond what is reasonable.

That’s the main agenda... But the biblical writers... and the communities behind them... and the Spirit within them... have other agendas. They want to reach you and teach you and encourage you. They want to touch you at deeper levels. So, while all the resurrection stories want the same leap of faith from you, they’re all unique in the way they go at it.

Luke has a story, none of the others tell. About these two, fairly random folks, walking home to Emmaus a suburb of Jerusalem. This story is really different from the other stories. The others are all pretty dramatic.

There Jesus is suddenly... in the Garden.

Or poof, there his is in the middle of a room...

Saying very profound and dramatic things...

Blessing and commissioning them.

This story is different.

It’s these two people, one of them named Cleopas and the other named... Betty???? Well... it doesn’t say what the other one’s name was. but she could have been a Betty. Or it might be Cleopas and Barney. The point being... these seem like average folks.

Jesus had been crucified...

There’s rumors of some ladies seeing him alive.

The real players are gathered in Jerusalem...

Wondering what’s next.

Cleopas and Betty headed home to the suburbs... The weekend’s over and they’ve got to get the kids to school. Cleopas has a big order to get out the next day.

All the other appearances are too Apostles and Saints. Saint Mary Magdalene... Saint Peter... Saint John. In this story Jesus appears to Cleopas and Betty... just walking home... nothing real dramatic.

Luke says, that they were, **“talking with each other about everything that had happened.”** You know how you do after a shocking event... a 9-11 kind of moment... everyone just keeps processing.

“Where were you when you heard?”

“I couldn’t believe so and so said thus and such.”

Something in us needs to retell and compare notes... that's what they were doing. **"I just didn't think they'd really kill him."** **"I know... that was the fear but I thought things would work out."** **"Did you see how quiet he was at the trial?"** **"Didn't say a thing, did he?"** **"Why did it have to be a cross... how humiliating... with thieves on either side to boot."**

And they're talking and Jesus himself comes up and walks alongside them and they were kept from recognizing him. Luke's careful with the way he says it. Not, **"they didn't recognize him."** Nope... **"they were kept from it."**

Who knows why?

Maybe Jesus was wearing a disguise... dressed up like a camel salesman... in a plaid cloak and snazzy looking hat.

Maybe Jesus looked different...

Or maybe there's just too much grief in their hearts to see straight.

Or maybe this is the way it always is and God reveals when God is good and ready.

Whatever the reason... it wasn't their fault. They weren't to blame for not knowing what was going on. And that may be just a bit of good news for some of you here this morning... walking life's road... wondering where God is... when God's going to show up... And probably assuming it's about you.

If you'd just get your act straight...

If you'd learn enough or try enough...

Get mystical somehow...

Then you'd see and belief would be easy. Maybe it's not your fault. God is running the revelation show. Your task is the journey.

"Jesus himself," Luke notes, **"walked with them but they were kept from recognizing him."**

They even did some bible study. Jesus says to them, **"Whatcha' talkin' 'bout?"**

"You gotta be kidding me," Betty said. And Cleopas added, **"You must be the only one in these parts not up to speed on what happened to Jesus."**

"Oh???", Jesus said, baiting them on.

And they told him about all the hopes they'd had for Jesus and what the rulers had done to him... and that's when they did the Bible study. Jesus, the teacher of teachers, told them everything the prophets had said about him and how this was to be expected. Still they didn't recognize him.

Have you ever confessed to someone that God seemed absent and had that well-meaning soul ask you if you were reading your Bible?

Like you can summon the divine by a little devotional reading.

Does God seem absent???

Nothing a little exegesis won't cure.

Don't do that... to people or to yourself. We don't conjure up encounters with God. I've learned that as a worship leader. Some Sundays, I walk in here thinking, **"Man, we got it going today... look out."** And, sure enough, things just seem to just lay there.

I'm not saying we ought not do our part with whatever... bible study, and other disciplines, or good worship planning. Just remember these two, Cleopas and Betty, walking with Jesus, listening to the Word Incarnate teach the bible and still, nothing.

And this goes on a while... It was seven miles to Emmaus. Probably up and down some hills... a stop at the Cracker Barrel to get something for the kids. This took most of the day and by the time they get home it's almost dark.

This is the ancient Middle East, where hospitality is a sacred duty. And it wasn't just that there weren't any Best Westerns... it was that they knew that how a society takes care of the stranger in it's midst matters to God and furthermore is a great indicator of the moral fabric of that culture.

So... Cleopas and Betty are supposed to invite them in. But Luke makes a point of saying, **"Jesus acted like he was to go further."** In other words, he faked it... like he was going to the next house or the next village.

Had he had enough small talk,

Ready to be alone with the Father and pray?

Or is this the Lord's M.O.? Always deferring... leaving us with choice and with our will. Waiting to be asked. Standing at the door of every heart and knocking, never barging in unwanted.

Betty saw Jesus doing his nice-walking-with-you routine, and said, **"No... we wouldn't think of it... you're staying with us."** So Jesus goes into their home, still unrecognized.

So, after they greet the kids and get them all to bed and send off the baby-sitter... they get a simple meal ready... Probably pull out a few leftovers. Had a little barbecue goat left and some lentil beans... and bread.

Luke makes it very clear that it was at the table where they recognize Jesus and thus knew him as the Risen Lord.

“When he was at the table, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.” That’s when their eyes were opened and do notice the language... not **“they opened their eyes,”** no **“their eyes were opened.”**

Everyone reading this in the early church would have gotten all excited and started flipping back through the papyrus. **“This sounds familiar, doesn’t it.”**

And sure enough, it was. At another meal... a big meal, that 5000 plate banquet, Luke used the same language. **“He took the fishes and loaves and... gave thanks and broke them and gave them to them.”**

Same language... same order.

He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave.

And the early church Christians flipped over a few more pages and there it was again. In that Upper Room the night before Jesus dies... It’s tender and strange and mysterious... but it’s the same. **“he took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them.”**

Isn’t that something? Tables and meals are important to Luke. They are special windows on the Divine presence.

And the early church knew that to be true... as do you. Things happen around tables. Common needs are acknowledged and met. Things are passed and shared. Good things are celebrated. You sometimes leave the table, full of more than the main course.

Of course, Luke has a larger agenda...

Most excellent Theophilus...

Most excellent Cleopus and Betty...

Most excellent Suzanne

Most excellent Keith... and Katy... and Mechelle... and Scott... most excellent DaySpring.

It is that you have certainty in the things you’ve been taught. He wants you to have faith. To believe... to leap into the world of resurrection and life that isn’t limited by the laws of Sir Isaac Newton.

So, in this story, the Risen Lord is recognized and known at the Lord's Table... in Communion... in the mystical meal. At one level that's what Luke is telling all his most excellent readers.

And for all we who grew up Baptist... this is something we're having to work at isn't it. Or trust in, in some deeper way. To come to the table and let it have it's way with us. Luke wants you to know that there is something in that meal that can make you more certain of what you've been taught... at one level... that's when our eyes will be opened.

At another, perhaps more common level, I'm wondering if eyes don't tend to be opened whenever things, meals... gifts... lives... are lifted to God in gratitude.

Whenever they are broken, so as to be shared.

Is it in those moments of deep gratitude and brokenness for the sake of another, that the resurrection becomes real to us?

No longer unbelievable hearsay,

No longer a doctrine to wrestle with,

but a reality we have certainty of.

We'll see, when we take... bless... break... and share.

That's what happened on the first Sunday night... Cleopas and Betty had their eyes opened and they recognized him and then "poof" just like that, he disappeared from their sight. But... they had what they needed for that moment in their journey. (Which, btw, seems to be the way God works with us).

They got what they needed, got up at once, and walked seven miles back to Jerusalem in the dark. Woke the disciples up and confessed what this gospel writer Luke wants us all to be able confess, **"It's true! The Lord is risen."**

Amen.

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