

## Faith and Art: The Beauty of Our Walk with the Risen Christ

### Luke 24:13-35

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Sunday, May 22, 2011

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Well, friends, it is May 22nd (the day after May 21st), and you are all still here! I'm not sure that's good. I will say in all seriousness that I do believe, according to Jesus' own teachings, that he will return. I join with believers from the very first century who have been praying, *Come, Lord Jesus!* I do believe that we will all be judged and found to have missed the mark. On that day I will rely on Jesus' righteousness, not my own, to be found right with God.

If it were up to us to live lives worthy of salvation we would have a hopeless case. We would all be headed for the pit. However, this is not the Gospel...that with enough effort and anxious attention we can somehow save ourselves. The gospel message is that Jesus has come, and is still coming, to save. We are saved by his grace in the face of our sinful lives through faith in Jesus, God's Son, whom he sent as our way, our truth, our life.

For his followers life begins today in his kingdom, and continues into eternity, all the way through God's righteous judgment. Let me invite you now to reaffirm what we just said at the conclusion of our prayer of confession:

Friends, believe the good news of the Gospel! In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

Hear what you said: *In Jesus Christ*. Find your assurance in him, not yourself, not your righteousness, not your personal piety, not in the predictions of false prophets, but in him. Know that because you have forgiveness in him, you are now free from worrying about that day and when it will come. Freed not so you can sin all the more, that grace may abound. So that you can eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. No! You are freed now to live a life, as Paul says, *worthy of your calling*. Because the Holy Spirit is granting you power and peace that can only come through him.

To be watchful is to live with joyful anticipation, not with fear. Jesus says in Matthew 24, *About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*. Remember what "Gospel" means: good news.

Let us pray:

*Father in Heaven, we confess that too often we become distracted by the bad news which surrounds us and look for trouble instead of good. Help us, so our eyes may be opened to your presence everywhere around us, in our loved ones and in our neighbors, that we may each play our own part in living your kingdom way into the world, shedding light, not darkness and sharing good news which the world so desperately needs to hear. Grant that your Holy Spirit would work in our hearing of your Word, so we can live as faithful followers of your Son, looking with hope to his return. Amen.*

Today we conclude our Faith and Art series with a celebration of the beauty of our walk with the risen Christ, who comes by surprise to his followers. It is interesting that his coming would be a surprise to these disciples, because he told them all along he was going to come again. When the women came from the tomb with news of having seen Jesus, the men called these words "idle tales." This is the mindset of these two disciples as they walked toward Emmaus. The passage in Luke 24:13 begins, *Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened.*

It is worth pointing out that we don't know exactly where Emmaus is. We know it was a real place, but it is hard to know just where because the details have been lost over the centuries. The exact location is less

important than what it stands for in this passage. For these men, it stands for a return to life as they knew it. The two of them, one named Cleopas, have just had all of their hopes dashed and their dreams crushed. They had given their lives to Jesus as followers, students, and apprentices to his way of life. They had trusted that he could somehow change the ways of the world as they knew it, which was cruel in many respects.

In this time, disease was hard to control, food was not always easy to come by, pure water was a rarity, shelter and civil justice was guaranteed to no one. On top of these routine adversities was the oppression of the occupying Roman government, overseen in this place by Pilate and co-opted by Herod and his family. Power by “force of death” was the rule of the day.

I recently completed the new biography of Cleopatra by Stacy Schiff, which documents political power struggles in the Mediterranean world in the decades leading up to the time of Jesus. If you have done much reading about this period, you know that many bloody transitions took place from one emperor to another and of the effects these struggles had on Roman vassal rulers such as Cleopatra in Egypt, and others in Judea and in Galilee. Those in power lived with a daily self-protective paranoia and lesser rulers attempted to bet on every side, unsure which narcissistic psychopath would rise to power next.

I quote from the book in description of one of these bloody transitions, “When Rome divided themselves into Antonians and Octavians for a fierce two-day-long street battle, the...Octavians prevailed. The truth was closer to that suggested by two talking ravens. Their equitable trainer had taught the first to squawk, ‘Hail Caesar, our victorious commander.’ The other learned: ‘Hail Antony, our victorious commander.’ A smart Roman had every reason to hedge his bets and to believe that with their hotheaded rhetoric and their personal agendas, Antony and Octavian were perfectly interchangeable....”<sup>1</sup>

People such as these two followers of Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus were used to the treacheries of power around them and had seen the fruits of the reign of Rome most personally in the crucifixion of their teacher, their rabbi, their friend. They had longed for a messiah to overcome it all, but Jesus had suffered a criminal’s death by Roman execution, a shockingly common fate for anyone who questioned the divine authority of an emperor.

Jesus had said, *Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s*, but that teaching got lost in the mix of political accusation and save-your-own-hide agendas of Jerusalem at the time. So these two disciples were returning to life as they knew it, as cruel as it was. They were resigned that Jesus had, in the end, not delivered as promised. You have heard it said in popular media, “Life is a [fill in the blank], and then you die.” At that moment, the road to Emmaus was a road of despair and resignation to the ways of the world.

How many times have you walked that road? How many times have you headed down a path with confidence in a leader or a movement or a book or a philosophy, or perhaps even a religious group, only to find at the most important moment, when that person or movement you placed your trust and hope in was tested, it all fell apart? How many messiahs have you followed, only to find your hopes dashed? At the feet of how many idols have you placed your devotion? For most, if not all of us, the answer is many, in sometimes big, sometimes more subtle ways.

But something different is happening here, a twist on the normal pattern. Verse 15 says, *While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them*. A whole lot is packed into the wording of that verse. *While they were talking and discussing*, while they were saying, “I can’t believe it’s over. He’s gone. It’s done.” While they were distracted by doubts on that road of despair to Emmaus...*Jesus himself came near*.

There is an implied emphasis in the word *himself*. Not an angel. Not a messenger. Not another disciple with an unconfirmed story about an appearance. Not a child sent on dispatch with more rumors. No, it is Jesus, whose death they had witnessed, coming near. He comes to them, to walk beside them. Isn’t that just like Jesus? Isn’t that just like God... to seek us out, even as we are heading away?

When I was growing up, around the age of fourteen, I had a Roman Catholic friend named Mike who,

around 4pm every Saturday when we were hanging out and having fun, was called home to go to Saturday night Mass. I once asked him, "Isn't that a bummer, having to go to church on a Saturday night?" To which he responded, with unusual sincerity, "Our confirmation teacher said last week, 'If Jesus can give you his life, can't you give him one hour a week?'"

"Hard to argue with that," I said. I took to the custom of attending Mass with him on Saturday, then, of course, complained to my mother about going to church the next morning. Six months later, Mike was killed in a biking accident on the road and I'll always remember how God had given him an understanding beyond his years before he was killed.

When we are heading away, distracted by many things, God is coming to us in person to walk with us on that road of despair. This is affirmed in the last few words of verse 15, *he went with them*. Interesting, isn't it? Jesus doesn't just stop them on the road and say, "Come back to Jerusalem; the movement isn't over. Don't be so sad!" No, he instead continues with them all the way to the end of that road of despair, all the way to Emmaus. In fact, he was ready to go even further but they invite him in to stay for the night and to share a meal.

He will go as far as needed to pursue us and give us hope. As the Apostles' Creed says, "He descended into hell." He went that far. In Psalm 139 the Psalmist affirms, *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Notice that Jesus does not impose his authority or presence. Rather he walks *beside* them in such a way they cannot help but invite him into their lives, into their very homes. Verse 28 says, *As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day now nearly over.'*

As they sat at table with him, the passage says, *their eyes were opened* as he blessed and broke bread and gave it to them. It is in that moment that they recognize the one who had broken bread before, who had given himself to be broken for their sake, who had sought them out and now drew them back to hope. Life has changed because he came. It will never be the same.

Dallas Willard writes in his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, "Those who have apprenticed themselves to Jesus learn an undying life with a future as good and as large as God himself. The experiences we have of this life as his co-conspirators now fill us with anticipation of a future so full of beauty and goodness we can hardly imagine."<sup>2</sup> Life has changed because of what he taught us. Life has changed because he suffered for us and thereby freed us from suffering. Life has changed because he has shown us a way of life which did not end yesterday and will not end tomorrow, because we have hope. Our Savior has come to seek us out, to walk beside us all the way home to the kingdom of God.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 245.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 375.