

**When Our Eyes Are Opened**  
**March 30, 2008**

We continue with Luke's account of Jesus' appearance to Cleopas and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend are mourning the death of Jesus, when someone joins them. These travelers describe their grief and confusion to this fellow traveler, somehow unaware that it is their risen Lord who is walking alongside of them. Now listen as the two travelers reach their home in Emmaus.

**Luke 24:28-35:**

As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God!**

There is a sucker born every minute. Scammers are ready to take advantage of those who trust too quickly. So we are skeptical of news that sounds too good to believe. We receive junk emails and letters in our mailbox about having won the lottery or the Publisher's Clearinghouse sweepstakes and we know there has to be a catch. Recently I have heard a radio commercial about receiving a free lap top computer. The commercial makes it sound like a great deal with no strings attached. I may be wrong, but I am skeptical because I figure, "there is no such thing as a free lunch." If it sounds too good to believe, it probably is. In the movie *Pretty Woman*, Julia Roberts's character asserts, "The bad stuff is easier to believe."

The bad stuff is easier for Cleopas and his companion to believe as they are walking the seven miles back to Emmaus. They had high hopes when they came to Jerusalem a week earlier for the Passover celebration. Cleopas and his friend were not one of Jesus' twelve disciples, but they were likely among the extended group of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem.

These two travelers are sorrowful. Their Messiah is dead. Sure, they have heard the reports of an empty tomb and the rumor that Jesus is alive, but it all sounds too good to be true. Cleopas and his friend find it is easier to believe in the bad stuff. Walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, there is not much to say about what is really bothering them. They think that Jesus is dead, dead, dead, and there is nothing they can do about it.

Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as “the place we go to in order to escape: a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole thing go. It makes no difference anyway.’ Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had, ideas about love and freedom and justice, have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends.”<sup>1</sup>

On their journey to Emmaus, they are looking to escape, but things start to change when a mysterious man joins Cleopas and his friend on the road. At first glance, it seems hard to believe that they do not recognize Jesus, the person they have been talking about, but, to be fair, Jesus is the last person they expect to meet on that road. Have you ever ran into someone you know at a completely unexpected place and had a hard time recalling their name, even though you would have no problem remembering them under normal circumstances? We tend to see what we are looking for and we also tend to not see what we are not looking for. We selectively pay attention to our lives and are sometimes deaf and blind to what can transform our lives. We can become too cynical, unable to notice God’s hidden hand guiding our lives and providing hope to a broken world. How might we loosen our hold on life so that we can make room to observe God’s novelty?

A good way to discover God’s activity today is for us to learn from the post-resurrection Jesus. There is a gap in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, the great creeds of the church. Both creeds do not discuss the post-resurrection Jesus; they instead jump from Jesus’ resurrection to his ascension. For example, in the Apostles’ Creed, we say, Jesus “on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty.” The Apostles’ Creed makes it sound like immediately after Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended back into heaven. These creeds act like nothing important happened in between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension. But the truth is Jesus appears to his disciples for forty days after his resurrection. The Gospels tell us the story of at least five of Jesus’ post-resurrection encounters, including Jesus’ meeting with Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus.

We need these post-resurrection stories. Last Sunday on Easter, we proclaimed, Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! But what does that really mean? During his life, Jesus has already brought people back from the dead. After all, Jesus resurrected his friend Lazarus, but Christ’s resurrection means so much more than Lazarus’ rebirth. When Jesus first meets the women at the tomb, they are understandably terrified and confused. Jesus’ followers then and now needed him to teach us about God’s plan for those forty days. Jesus does some of his most important teaching after his resurrection. He is preparing to leave these disciples with his Holy Spirit to continue his work. Jesus’

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 85-86.

teaching allows the disciples to move from despair to joy, from confusion to conviction, and from unbelief to trust in Christ's salvation.

When reading Jesus' post-resurrection encounters, there are times that I am envious of Mary Magdalene, the other women at the tomb, Simon Peter, Thomas, and Cleopas and his friend. After all, they got to see Jesus with their own eyes and touch the nail marks in his hands. Two thousand years later, we do not get to see Jesus with our own eyes; we are left with the faithful testimony of those early disciples. I have been tempted to think Jesus has not given us enough, but then my eyes opened as I listened to this story. Cleopas and his friend actually see Jesus and that is not enough for them to realize who he is. Then they hear his voice. He physically walks alongside of them. He offers them instruction about the Scriptures and even then they still do not get it. Then they invite Jesus into their house, he breaks bread with them, and they finally know who he is.

This story shows us that even if we were able to see Jesus with our own eyes, it would not guarantee that our eyes would be open to seeing who was really in front of us. We have an opportunity to experience something similar to what Cleopas and his friend do. They hear the Scriptures proclaimed, which remind them of God's promises in the past. We read Scripture each and every week in worship because these holy texts testify to a God who has been active in the lives of believers and promises to continue to be involved in this world. Cleopas and his companion are spiritually fed when Jesus breaks bread with them; we can also be nourished with Christ's spiritual presence when we share in the cup of blessing and bread of heaven in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

In cartoons based on the Peanuts comic strip, whenever the children heard their teacher talking, she sounded like, "Waw, waw, waw." All of us have been at meetings in the office, lectures in class, sat in church, watched television or a play without really listening. In those moments, the person speaking might as well be saying, "Waw, waw, waw." Sometimes that is because what we are listening to is boring. There are times when people can be full of words without really saying anything of substance.

Other times, however, we may be missing an important message. One person can look at the most beautiful sunrise and yawn in disinterest. Another person can look at the exact same sunrise and praise God for the glory of creation. One person can see great works of art like the Mona Lisa or the David and be bored by masterpieces that have inspired generations. Someone listening to one of Martin Luther King or John Calvin's greatest sermons may be ignoring their message and wondering what is for lunch. This year, we can look at the empty grave and think it is just the same Easter story and God does not particularly have anything new or interesting to tell us.

Jesus opens the eyes of Cleopas and his friend, but he does not do so immediately. Jesus lets them have their space as they walk for seven miles along the road. There is no magic formula to follow that will guarantee God will open our eyes, but the story shows us that it is essential for us to be receptive to God's Spirit. Jesus' presence comes to Cleopas and his companion only after they have asked him to stay with them in their home. We too have the choice to be closed off to Christ or we can invite him into our lives.

Once Jesus opens our eyes, we are never the same. After Jesus opens the eyes of Cleopas and his friend, they go back to Jerusalem. Think about how illogical that is. These two men have already walked seven miles and are probably exhausted. They have another seven-mile journey ahead of them in the darkness of night, but they go because they are full of energy and excitement. They know that Christ is alive and they feel compelled with joy to share that good news.

Any of our young children can tell us that, as Christians, we affirm Jesus' resurrection from the grave. What kind of difference will that make for us? A few years ago, *Newsweek* magazine ran a cover story about the continuing influence of Jesus. The magazine asked Americans, "Do you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead after dying on the cross?" Eighty-eight percent of Christians said, "Yes." Surprisingly, thirty-two percent of *non*-Christians also said, "Yes."<sup>2</sup> Almost one-third! What are we supposed to make of that? It is amazing that so many non-Christians believe that Christ rose, but apparently that fact has no relevance for them. So the new question becomes, "So what?" Does Jesus' resurrection help me make sense of my life? Can it give me direction when I feel rudderless and provide hope when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death? Can it change my life?

Jesus wants to open our eyes. Our eyes are opened when our faith becomes REAL. When sin stops being a definition we regurgitate and becomes an honest acknowledgement of how our actions have caused real pain and we are deeply sorry about it. When we would do anything to be able to take back our sin and wipe the slate clean, Jesus has opened our eyes. When we face our own mortality or the death of a loved one and heaven becomes not just some abstract thought or pleasant idea, but a hope we believe in, rely upon, and cling to, our eyes have been opened. When grace is no longer simply something we say before we eat, but is a sense of awe at God's mercy, our eyes are being opened. Christ is alive and can open our eyes so that we can see God's goodness, mercy, and resurrection power all around us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Newsweek's* March 2, 1999 Cover Story on Jesus Christ and his continuing relevance.