

## EMMAUS ROADS

Last week we were thinking about how spiritual experiences are very hard to describe to someone else.

If you ever have a sense of wonder, or a sense of connection, or a sense that there is something more (something bigger) – if you ever have a sense of the presence of God, it's a powerful (and very real) thing - but its hard to explain it to others and put into words.

The stories we hear at Easter are like this.

After the death of Jesus, his friends begin having encounters with him and are convinced that somehow he still lives – that the cross was not the end it seemed. The stories they tell about this fact (and the huge change in them) are filled with great excitement and passion, but difficult for us to take in and fully understand.

Sometimes the risen Jesus seems flesh and blood – other times more like a vision. Sometimes he is recognised immediately – other times people don't seem to recognise him at all.

The story of the walk to Emmaus is another one of these incidents, and I guess the standout thing is that Jesus is not recognised by the two companions even though they are walking together for seven miles. That's quite a walk.

An old friend of mine (a good bit older than me) is John Young - a now retired minister. One day when he was a young man he went to a bakers shop in Glasgow. There was a bit of a queue in front of him. And there was a bit of a wait to be served. Immediately before him was a woman in a long coat and a hat, and she and John stood next to each other for at least 5 minutes just waiting.

It was only when she had been served and walked out of the shop that some other people started talking and pointing and speaking about her.

This was the woman. She was the Hollywood star, Betty Grable.

And John was gutted! Because he loved Betty Grable. He went to all her films and considered her his ideal woman.

Never did he dream he could have the chance to meet her, and there she was standing next to him and he never took the big opportunity to say a word or ask for an autograph.

Why did he not recognise her when he was such a big fan?

Because he wasn't really paying attention.

And because he never dreamed she was visiting Scotland.

And he never would have imagined she herself would be standing in a queue to a Glasgow bakers shop.

So if we add Michelle Obama to Betty Grable, today we have heard about two different women in shops and not being recognised at first (or at all..)

Is the Emmaus story like that?

Is it really the case of people not paying proper attention?

Hard to believe.

A seven mile walk with someone and you never at any stage realise who that person is?

Scotland's Professor Willie Barclay who often made good points, was not having a great day (in my opinion at least) when he suggested in his Bible commentary, that the reason the folks didn't recognise Jesus was because the sun was in their eyes, because they were walking into the sunset, as Emmaus was due west of Jerusalem.

I don't think so!

Apart from anything else there no evidence whatsoever that Emmaus was west of Jerusalem.

Truth is, no one knows where this Emmaus was.

The Bible says it was 7 miles from Jerusalem, but although historians and archaeologists have suggested possible locations, no one is sure.

There is no other record of the place.

The Emmaus mystery deepens a wee bit more when you realise this....

The person Cleopas is not known before or after.

It was a man's name, but that's all we know. And despite the fact that most pictures of Emmaus and commentaries say the other person was male we don't know that. This un-named person might indeed be male. Or it could have been his wife or girlfriend or sister.

Some people think that this whole story is a parable.

It's a parable about how we encounter Jesus – how Jesus can often draw near to us when we least expect – how Jesus is with us on our own life journeys.

The mysterious Cleopas and unnamed companion stand for ordinary people – not those folk who had the opportunity to be in Jesus' closest circle of friends.

Other folk will say, despite the strangeness of the tale, it's a historical story.

Just because we cant find the site of Emmaus does not prove there never was such a place.

And as for the two travellers not recognising Jesus on a seven-mile walk here are two reasons how that could have happened.

The first is that Jesus looked different. His physical appearance had changed. And if that's the case why should they (how could they) have recognised him?

The second reason could be that those folk had never actually met Jesus before.

Maybe Cleopas and his companion had never physically met him. They may have heard all about Jesus from others but without seeing him face to face. That could account for not recognising him.

Well, its unlikely we will ever know for sure.  
 Maybe it's one or the other. Or both. I don't know.  
 But I do know this.

The purpose of the stories in scripture is for us to find meaning in them.

Maybe there is a place called Emmaus. Maybe this *is* a historical tale. But the point of the Bible is not just to supply us with random stories from long ago. The stories are there to help us – to teach us something – to help us learn more about God and draw closer to God.

The important thing about today's story is what we can take from it. What can we find to encourage us or help us grow in faith?

The Emmaus Road message is that Jesus walks with us. In the words of that African American spiritual we sung a few minutes ago, Jesus walks with us throughout our lives. Whether we are aware of God or not, God is never far from us.

Here are two things for us to notice.

### **Jesus was recognised in the breaking of the bread.**

It was as Jesus blessed and broke the bread around the table that these travellers realised who he was. The Bible says it was then that they recognised him. (v31)  
 Interesting fact.  
 Were these two people (whoever they were) actually present at the Last Supper? Seems very unlikely. Remember that event had only happened 3 days before..

Well, how did they realise it was Jesus at that moment?  
 Must have been something rather than just memory going on here.  
 This was God breaking through.

Here's another woman. Her name is Sara Miles.

Her grandparents on both sides were missionaries. Both her parents rebelled against their religious upbringing and as a result Sara grew up with no religious knowledge, to the extent that she could say that at age 46 she had never heard a gospel reading, had never said the Lord's Prayer, and she only actually knew one person in the whole world who went to church. Living in California as a radical journalist, a lesbian and into progressive politics her image of church then suggested to her that she would not be welcome. Anyway that was fine. She had no interest in church and was sure that church would had no interest in her.

One day she found herself outside St Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco just as a service was about to start and for some reason she walked inside.

She had no idea why she did it or what to expect. Everything was strange to her. She didn't have a clue. She didn't really understand what was going on. Then it was Communion and people walked to the front to receive the bread and wine. She found herself joining the crowd going forward, and suddenly she could sense that something was happening. Suddenly she had an unmistakable sense of God. Suddenly she began to believe.

Eight years later she is on the staff of that church. And she began something in that congregation that has become well known. Each week groceries are collected and placed on that communion table, before being given out to the poor and homeless in that city. She wrote a book about it, and it became a best seller. And the model she created for this has been picked up by other churches in America, and even in Canada. Sara Miles is now a well known Christian writer, campaigner and commentator, even though a few years ago she had almost no knowledge of the faith. And it all started for her by the sharing of bread and wine.

An insightful Bible teacher called Richard Rohr suggest the Emmaus story underlines the importance of Communion.

He says 'In this story Luke is teaching his community about Christ's presence among them.

He hears them asking something like, *"Okay, it's the year 80 already, we don't see Jesus any more, so how is Jesus present to us?"*

Luke's response is, *"He is present in the breaking of the bread – the Eucharist..... We know him in this celebration. We can't sit down at the table like the first disciples did. I wasn't there myself," says Luke, "But we can sit at a new table in our town and experience the Lords Supper just as they did, and know him just as they did, in the breaking of bread - and our hearts will burn within us."*

(Richard Rohr: Luke p191)

Sara's is a good story, but despite what happened to Sara and what Richard Rohr says I don't think the Emmaus story is an advert for Communion.

Of course we can meet God and draw close to God in this Sacrament. But we can meet God in other ways and times and places too.

I think it's more about there being a moment when God opens our eyes. Sometimes we just became aware of God and the ordinary becomes special and the world becomes different – filled with light and goodness and hope.

What happened at that table was that God broke through to them. They were filled with an awareness of God.

Here's the second thing....

**There are things we can do to increase our spiritual awareness.**

We may not be able to summon God like a genie or something out of a slot machine. We may not be able to get an awareness of God-on-demand, or guarantee a spiritual experience for ourselves.

We can't do that.

God can break through to us on any occasion and can do so unexpectedly and at surprising moments.

Yet clearly there are things we **can** do that will increase our chances in becoming aware of God with us..

If we look back to that story, what were these travellers doing on their journey?

They were thinking about and discussing God and life's meaning, reflecting on the life and teaching of Jesus, wondering if that dream was dead, discussing together and reading scripture, and taking part in the Lords Supper...

Being part of a worshipping fellowship – being involved in a Christian community, opening our lives to God in prayer and in opportunities for worship all increase our chances of becoming more aware of God's presence in our lives.

Now you may feel – we may feel – that our spiritual life isn't up to much.

We may be thinking that this whole area of our lives is undeveloped. We may be thinking that spiritually we haven't really got started. We might be feeling a bit inadequate.

Well, let me finish today by suggesting two pieces of good news.

First, there are loads of different things we can do to begin making a difference. There are all sorts of spiritual practices that we can easily explore...

Getting into the habit of spending time in prayer.

Reading Scripture or other spiritual writings.

Spending time in silence.

Building in rest periods to our frantic working week.

Meditating on our breathing and becoming aware of the breath of God

Giving up some time to serve people in need.

Speaking and working for justice.

Going on retreat.

Practicing a simpler lifestyle

Being part of a small fellowship group.

Coming to worship together each week.

There are all kinds of things we can investigate and use to promote better spiritual health.

Second, it is possible for us to make a start right now.  
Our spiritual journey is made up of tiny steps.  
Sometimes we are moving closer to God - other times were moving further away.

The direction we are travelling is the most important thing and so even if we feel we're not in the most spiritually healthy place now, all we need to begin moving in the right direction is to take that first step. And God honours us wherever we are on the journey.

Where we are on that road is less important than working out whether we are facing towards God or moving away.

It not like learning a musical instrument. With that you have to attain some kind of level of proficiency before anyone would want to listen to you. God isn't into grading us. God isn't waiting to select the top 10% most spiritual people and ready to forget about the rest of us.

God is always willing us on, delighted when we take that first step and keen to encourage us.  
No one ever gets to end of their spiritual journey. Nobody runs out of things to learn.  
But what matters is just to be on that journey.  
And every single one of us can make a start today or any day.

In other words, however distant we feel from God, however stale or stalled that relationship might appear to be, we can actually choose to do something about it right now, and begin to put down the roots that matter.

Prayer

God of love,  
open our hearts to you and each other.  
Give us the wisdom to see ourselves as we truly are.  
Give us the vision to see you and hear your voice.  
Give us the courage to answer your call  
Grant us the endurance to use our gifts  
for the purpose of your realm.  
Work your transforming love within us  
that we may know your will  
and serve you with joy. **Amen.**

Luke 24:13-35

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NOTE: In fact there is a woman called Mary (one of many New Testament Marys!) who was present with Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the cross.

In John's gospel she is described as the wife of **Clopas**. (John 19:25)

This Clopas could well be the same person as Cleopas.