

All Saints Talk for 31 March 2024 – Easter Sunday

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God's Questions: 'What are you discussing?'

Luke 24v13-35 The Road to Emmaus

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay [Abide] with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Today is the last instalment of our sermon series *God's questions* where we've been looking at just some of the times when God asks people questions in the Bible, and reflecting on how we might respond to those same questions today. It has been a great series! We started with God's first question 'where are you?' which was directed to Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. Of course, God knew exactly where Adam was hiding, but by his questioning God invited him to come out of the shadows to engage with him in dialogue and so begins the major storyline of the bible which is God's quest to reconcile humanity back to himself.

The first thing Jesus said after his resurrection was also a question, to Mary. 'Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?' Jesus knew Mary was looking for him, but it was only when he said her name, 'Mary', that she recognised his voice and realised he wasn't the gardener.

So two gardens, two questions, and in both we find God seeking relationship and reconciliation with people. The whole story of the Bible and indeed the purpose of life itself is the creator's pursuit of his creation, through reconciled love and relationships. Even though Jesus had just conquered death, overcome evil and bought freedom for the whole of humanity, he ushers in his new kingdom reign relationally, one person at a time. Mary was the first to have her eyes opened, but then later on that day we read in Luke 24 that two other disciples were given the treat of a lifetime when Jesus started walking beside them on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus was disguised in such that they didn't recognise him. It is a wonderful encounter, sparked by this playful question from Jesus. 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?'

So this is a question for us to think about this Easter. What are we discussing as we go about our lives today? Perhaps you are thinking about family coming round, the sport or eating chocolate now that Lent is over. Perhaps you are distraught about a painful situation, maybe questioning what is happening in the world and asking God where are you in all this? Well, be encouraged because that is just what the disciples on the road were asking.

I find lots of things intriguing about these resurrection encounter stories, particularly why Jesus didn't just bounce up to them and say 'ta da! It's me!'

Have you ever been with someone famous and didn't recognise them? Archbishop Justin Welby tells the story of trying to order a takeaway at Lambeth Palace. The motorbike rider couldn't find the entrance to the Palace so Justin went out to meet him near the end of Lambeth bridge. Eventually the Archbishop flagged him down and took receipt of the takeaway, and that's when the rider asked him 'so do you work here then?'

Justin Welby says it's because he has a very forgettable face.

The four Gospels describe how Jesus met the disciples in different ways after his resurrection. Instead of making a huge *wam-bam* public appearance, he met with individuals and spent time with them, employing all the senses to impart the profound impact of his resurrection to them personally. When he spoke to Mary in the garden, it was only when she *heard* her own name that she recognised Him. Although the other disciples simply needed to *see* Jesus together, he offered his hands and feet for Thomas to *touch* him and dispel his doubts. The disciples on the road to Emmaus needed to understand, and Jesus took the time to go *explain* the scriptures with them. But it was only when he *broke bread* with them that their eyes were opened and they truly recognised him.

Each of us are wired differently and we will each respond spiritually in different ways. The Lord knows what we need!

Some of us will be thinkers who wrestle to understand the scriptures and how everything fits together. Others will be feelers who experience God's presence through the fellowship of community or sharing in activity together. Others will be mystics who love to hear God's voice and long to encounter him supernaturally. Well for the couple on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion, (maybe his wife Mary?), Jesus started by listening to their sadness and confusion over all that had happened. They started by being honest and with faces downcast they acknowledged their real thoughts and feelings to Jesus. 'We had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel'.

Many people go through a spiritual deconstruction at some point in their lives. When things don't go to plan or it feels like God is silent for some time, our natural reaction can be to want to walk away. Sometimes like them we want to give up and head off to the safety of Emmaus. Emmaus literally means 'warm spring' and it is like these two disciples just wanted to leave the trauma of Jerusalem in favour of the comfort of a secure place and a warm bath. They were walking away from Jerusalem, away from the fellowship of the disciples, and away from those who were claiming to have seen anything miraculous. They'd had enough. But as they walked along, albeit in the wrong direction, Jesus gently started to explain through the scriptures that God had a bigger plan. One of the best things you can hear this Easter is that God loves you and has a plan for your life. He is in control despite all that is happening. He knows all about the challenges we face. He knows and grieves over suffering. He also knows about the bigger things too. He knows all about Israel and Gaza. He has Ukraine in his heart. Ultimately the Bible says that every knee will bow before the Lord, including Netanyahu and Putin. We just pray that it is sooner rather than later.

Jesus explained God's plan in the scriptures concerning himself. He would have shared from the Psalms and all about the suffering servant in Isaiah. He would have explained that Satan no longer has the final say over this world, that his death and resurrection sealed the victory over evil, death and suffering. The joy of Easter is that Jesus won and he invites us to share in his victory.

Cleopas and his companion sensed hope rising in their hearts as Jesus was sharing with them, so they begged him to stay with them for the evening. This is the turning point in their story. The old translation puts their request like this: '*abide with us*'. What a great prayer. Lord stay with me this Easter.

I love the fact that Jesus pretended to go on as if he was walking further. Why? Well Jesus does not impose himself on anyone. Christianity is all about invitation, not imposition. He invites the world to respond. People can freely choose to ignore him, or open the door for him to eat with him, just as it says in Revelation 3v20 'Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.' It is up to us to open the door.

Cleopas and his companion invited Jesus in, so he gathered with them at the table to eat together.

In a moment we are going to share communion, which is not only a communal act of remembrance for all that Jesus did on the cross, but also a celebration of new life. The simplest description of the early church in Acts chapter 2 describes how the disciples 'devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer.'

During the Easter experience last week at Wasps, each class of children came to 'the upper room' and gathered round a table to learn about the last supper together. We broke bread and each child was given a piece to eat. When we ate it all together thinking of Jesus, it was a profound moment and it really felt like something of the life and message of Jesus lodged in their hearts.

Verse 31 of our passage says that Cleopas and his companion recognised Jesus when he broke the bread. That was enough because then he disappeared from their sight. If scientists are saying that 95% of the universe is normally undetectable to us, I suspect God can come and go as he pleases. We need faith to really grasp what is going on around us. Communion is one of those occasions where we can just go through the motions or truly recognise Jesus. For the couple in Emmaus, all the pieces started fitting together. Hindsight allowed them to see how God engineered things so that they would encounter him.

³² They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" I want some of that!

Then comes the climactic conclusion of the story: ³³ *They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.*

Christ met the two disciples, even as they were journeying in the wrong direction, despondent and faithless. But in hearing their prayers, through scripture, fellowship and communion, Jesus reignited their faith and set them back in the right direction. They got up immediately to return to Jerusalem where the Eleven were also finally catching on to the truth: 'It is true! The Lord has risen!'

Jesus wants to share his resurrection life with us. So wherever we are, whether we are in a good place or perhaps heading in the wrong direction, today is a great day to ask him to come in and stay with us a while.