



*Rev. Christ Taylor - 04.26.2020*

*Luke 24:13-35*

### *Meeting Jesus*

Back in the early fifties, molecular biologists had a problem. Six years before, a researcher named Oswald Avery had shown that DNA was the carrier of hereditary information in pneumococcal bacteria. Six years later, scientists were using the term “gene” to refer to the smallest unit of genetic information, but a lot of them believed that DNA had a structure that was too uniform and simple to actually store the genetic information for complex living organisms. The problem, then, was that while scientists were aware of genes, they really didn’t know what they looked like, or how a gene was copied for generation after generation.

In the summer of 1951 a couple of scientists named Crick and Watson met for the first time, and realized that until people could gain a detailed, three-dimensional configuration of the gene, they would never be able to figure out heredity and reproduction. They devoted the next eighteen months to developing that model. What made the task especially challenging was that it involved not just the field of molecular biology, but genetics, biochemistry, chemistry, physical chemistry and X-ray crystallography, as well. They conducted no DNA experiments of their own, but relied on the work of others. Their unique genius was in taking the research from a variety of different fields and pulling it together into a coherent whole. Still, multiple efforts at building a model fell short.

“But we had hoped...” those have to be among the saddest words in all the world. They speak of disappointed dreams, disillusionment and the loss of a light and joy that had drawn us forward. “But we had hoped that this three strand model of DNA would work. But we had hoped this new business venture would take off. But we had hoped that we would be able to have children by now. But we had hoped...”

That’s where those two followers of Jesus were on that first Sunday following his crucifixion. They are confused, disappointed, unsure about what to do or where to turn. “But we had hope that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel.” And so they’ve gone for a walk.

Years ago when our kids were infants or toddlers and I would be feeling overwhelmed or discouraged, I used to go home and pick one of the kids up and go sit in a rocker. Quietly rocking with that child in my arms was one of the comforting things I've ever known. I'd be reminded of what really mattered. It gave me perspective. It was like touching bedrock and being reassured that everything was going to be okay. "I've got my family. What else matters?"

It is clear these two disciples weren't convinced earlier in the day by the women and their report of an angelic vision. They were among those that Luke talks about back in the eleventh verse: "these words seemed to them [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them." So they are still grieving; they still believe that Jesus is dead. And now they've gone for a walk. It is likely that at least one of them if not both actually lived in Emmaus. They've gone home; gone to get some perspective; gone to get away from the other disciples and all the stories and speculation. Their hearts are very heavy. "We had hoped..."

And that, of course, is when Jesus shows up. They don't recognize him. Some have speculated that the sun was in their eyes because Emmaus was west of Jerusalem and the sun was beginning to set. Luke simply says "their eyes were kept from recognizing him," which actually sounds more plausible to me.

Jesus shows up and walks beside them and talks to them about this man Jesus who was a prophet mighty in deed and word and who they had hoped would set Israel free. And using Scripture, he helps them see why it was necessary that Jesus live and die as he did. Interestingly, in Acts 17:2-3 we find almost the exact same words of the Apostle Paul as he taught in a local synagogue. On three Sabbath days he "argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead..."

Jesus' explanation is so clear, so eloquent, that the two followers would later comment, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Lk. 24:32).

Maybe you have had that kind of experience, a moment when all of a sudden everything became very clear to you and all the pieces fell into place. One of my seminary professors used to call it an "aha" moment.

For Watson and Crick that moment came on February 28, 1953. A chemist named Jerry Donahue had been sharing their offices for a year, and on that day he pointed out that the textbooks had the configuration for the constituent elements of DNA wrong. Acting on Donahue's advice, Watson put two bases into their correct form in a cardboard model. While shifting the cut-outs of the cardboard Watson had his "aha" moment. Structuring the bases in this new way he could see, then, how they would then connect to the two helical backbones at right angles while the backbones themselves retained their regular shape, winding up around a common axis in opposite directions. Crucially, two other scientists of the time, Rosalind Franklin and Maurice Wilkins had obtained high-resolution X-ray images of DNA fibers that suggested a helical,

corkscrew-like shape. Here was a model that revealed how a molecule could both reproduce exact copies of itself and also carry genetic instructions.

Crick immediately understood the significance of their discovery. He went home that evening and told his wife they had made a big discovery. Years later she revealed that she hadn't believed a word of it. As she put it, "You were always coming home and saying things like that, so naturally I thought nothing of it." The discovery is considered one of the most significant of the twentieth century, and led to the Nobel Prize for Watson and Crick.

For Jesus' two followers, the "Aha" came as they listened to him share the great truths of scripture. Hearing him, all the different pieces fell into place. This is what God was doing, this is why Jesus had to suffer and die. Their hearts were burning. Here was the truth. Those women had it exactly right! The cross wasn't the end. It was the very fulfillment of all that they had hoped. And the resurrection was the proof; God's great stamp of approval on all that Jesus had done. And then, as they supped, the lifting of the veil and the realization that it had been Jesus who was with them all along.

Jesus with them always. But if they hadn't invited him to stay, if they hadn't opened their home and their lives to him he simply would have continued on.

When I was hiking the Camino Way last fall, I had one particularly tough day. My friend Ralph had gone home to support his wife as a hurricane approached their new home, so I was alone. It wasn't the hardest day of hiking by any means. We had faced far more difficult days before. But I was feeling lonely and discouraged. I got a late start, and as I reached the edge of the town I passed a guy who had camped the night before. He looked pretty grungy; straggly long hair, and whispery beard.

As the day progressed I kept seeing him which was unusual. Most of the time you would see someone once and then not see them again until that night or a day or two later. At one point I left the trail in the middle of a town to hike up to a church. I wanted some time to rest and to pray. No one else was around. The church, as it turned out, was locked so I sat on a bench on its porch. A few minutes later the guy showed up. He gave a nod and a smile and sat on a bench on the other side. That was it. After a while I got up and resumed my hike.

At another point I got lost. I turned the wrong way at a junction. It was the only time on the entire two week trip that I got lost. I finally found my way back to the trail about a half hour later. There was the guy again. His presence confirming that I was back on track.

Our final encounter was at my low point. Looking back I can't quite figure out how we connected again, but there he was, leaning against a fence. I came within a few feet of him as I passed, and he gave me a smile and a thumb's up, and somehow that smile and that upraised thumb lifted my spirits. It was like some light breaking in amid the darkness and I found myself wondering if this guy was Jesus.

It would be just like Jesus to show up like that: scraggly, unkempt, a fellow traveler along the road. I have no doubt that guy was there for me that day; someone to lift my spirits, someone to remind me that I was not alone, someone whose presence spoke of God's own.

That's what I would want to leave with you this morning. That's part of the message of this passage. Bidden or unbidden, God is always with us. Those disciples were at a low point, but God had not abandoned them. There was Jesus, right beside them, very much at work according to God's own good purposes. That same Jesus walks with you. That same Jesus is at work in your life. That same Jesus is holding you, even now.