

Sermon – 3rd Easter

Luke 24:13-32

April 26, 2020

“Seven Short Miles – An Eternity of Promises”!

This story seems innocent enough – a trio of Jewish guys walking the last of the day’s light away, talking over its events like neighbors leaning on a fence on a summer’s evening. Except for the fact the men were stunned by a stranger’s question – “*what are you discussing*” to which they responded, “*do you not know the things that have happened here these days.*” “*What things*” comes the reply. What things?! By clothing and accent, Cleopas and his walking buddy would have known this was a fellow Jew they were talking to, so they essentially asked “*where have you been - did you skip the Passover celebrations or something?* If they were of a tribe of people common to Wisconsin, they might have added “*uff!*”

Once they shrugged off their bewilderment at the question however, one can imagine their countenance changing as they started to talk endearingly but regretfully of someone they’d lost that weekend - on whom lots of hopes were pinned - a great teacher, a prophet they called him – Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. Then they accorded him an even higher accolade, suggesting he may have been Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, their “king”. He would have shown himself as Messiah too, “*come into his own*” as we say of promising young athletes now days, if it were not for the blindness of their religious leaders, who hated him and arranged for his crucifixion. But amazingly, some people were talking of a resurrection - a fantastic tale, wonderful if true, but likely not, no of course not - after all it was just “some women” who circulated the story – grief does strange things to a person after all.

Imagine if you will a long pause - nobody with much to say. Imagine Jesus kind of clearing his throat (maybe while muttering to *himself*...”uff”!) before saying “*men - how foolish you are about the Scriptures, and what they say about this Messiah.* It was 7 miles from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus –7 short miles to interpret over 1200 years of history – but hey, it was the author of history doing the interpreting.

In one of the great ironies of the gospel of Luke, it was quite obviously these two men who missed everything that went on in Jerusalem that week, not Jesus. So, where to begin to bring some clarity, but in the beginning of a story of which a conversation between two dying men on crosses was its conclusion.

The very last conversation our Lord had before he died was from the cross, where he heard a confession from a thief and fellow condemned criminal and pronounced to him forgiveness. To this dying man's plea "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*", Luke 23:43 records Jesus saying, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*"

Paradise. It would have figured prominently in this evening Bible study. Genesis 3 is the story of "*paradise lost*". Eve, the mother of all the living, and her husband Adam conceived for the first time in Genesis 3. But their firstborn was not a son but sin...the preferring of their way to God's. Jesus would have interpreted to his travel partners the implication of the first paradise - Eden, that to know good and evil means you are responsible for good and evil.

Paradise, despite its connection with the Biblical Garden and the Christian association with it to heaven, is best not thought of as a place but a word that fosters hope. It's a word given to the great promise that even the end of our life belongs to God and we will share in that blessed end. That's what the thief was given, hope, and when he gave his last hope over to Jesus, that man "entered paradise." To the men on the road to Emmaus Jesus would have framed his suffering of the previous days in light of the paradise once lost but now restored because of that suffering.

Paradise is the sort of word that can get gummed up in Utopian thinking – Jews thought of paradise as a restored Israel free of outside interference - a happy place where they could worship God freely and earnestly. But it's better understood as the gift of a future that can change and shape life in the present – causing a person to first turn away from him or herself, catch a glimpse of how things were intended by God to be, and fill a person with the longing and power to seek those things – today, even if that seeking comes in a less than happy world. I John 5:11 says "*God has given us eternal life, and this life IS his Son.*"

Jesus would have shown them that what happened in Jerusalem over the past week was anything but new – what had happened there happened in Eden long ago...sin coiled and curled up on a tree asking our inquiring minds to “*come...consider me.*” But in Jerusalem that previous Friday the sons and daughters of Eve and Adam were not enticed by what it saw on the tree – in Jerusalem when Jesus body was curled up they saw how awful sin’s consequences could be – they saw, even if they did not recognize, the real cost of sin. One by one those witnesses turned their faces from it. If only Eve and Adam would have done that in the first place, eh?

Jesus would have added something else which happened in Eden long ago happened in Jerusalem only days ago. There, Jesus, naked, hanging from a cross, became the covering for Adam and Eve’s sin. Genesis 3:21 says instead of death, God made garments of skin and clothed them” – covering their shame. On Calvary God fashioned something to clothe us again, not for a while, but forever – the grace of our Lord Jesus. Our lesson from I Peter today describes the contrast between what we can do by our own effort and what God can do. Peter expresses that with the word “perishable things”...we can call it an empty way of life...grass. Our will and our ways are like grass – only so much staying power to them...easily blown away.

Jesus would have shown his fellow travelers that this wild talk of resurrection, which “some women” in their midst were babbling about earlier that day also included the Genesis story of Joseph – Abraham’s great grandson, ‘*little Jesus*’ some have called him, the first person to show how complicated forgiveness is, but how freeing it is, how forgiveness turns things around.

Virtually any Jew in Jesus day would have been able to recite their ancestor Joseph’s famous words to his jealous and vindictive brothers from Genesis 50 – when from a position of power he said “*Don’t be afraid...even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to save a numerous people, as he is doing today.*” Luke tells us in our story today that the men Jesus talked with recalled “*their hearts burning within us as he opened up the Scriptures.*” By the time the Joseph story was interpreted for them in light of the suffering of Messiah, things would have definitely been warming up in those hearts.

There would have been more - Jesus would have taken them through the writings of Samuel, the first great prophet of Israel who tells us of another ancestor of Messiah, King David, and a promise he received that despite his many failings God would select a descendant of his who *“shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits (that is becomes) iniquity, I shall punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him.”*

By now those hearts would have been blazing – for up to that moment it simply wouldn’t have been possible for a Jew in Jesus’ day to make that connection, link dying and ruling – suffering and being honored - no way for them, nor for all sorts of people today, to get from a cross to Psalm 116:15, which says *“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”*

When the evening stroll was over and it was time for dinner, Jesus may have even started up a chant of that beloved Psalm of David – the 23rd, commonly sung at nighttime among the Jews. Can you imagine the serene sound of Jesus’ singing into the night air *“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me – your rod and staff they comfort me?”* When this *“7 Mile Bible Study”* was over, Jesus dined and though the guest, assumed the role of host, breaking the bread and giving thanks. He would have washed his hands and uttered a simple Jewish table prayer - *“Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, for in your wisdom you bring forth bread from the ground. Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, for you bring forth fruit from the vine.”*

At that moment, Luke tells us, *“the eyes of these two men were opened, and they recognized that it was Jesus.”* Dear people, God always talks to our hearts first – in order for our vision to be correct and we walk by faith, not by sight. It’s sometimes said that this resurrection day story from Luke is about the interpretation of Scripture – but in truth it’s a story about how Scripture interprets us.

We're the ones prone to miss "*the things that happened in Jerusalem*" because what happened in Jerusalem was our doing. Well then did the great hymn of the church - "*Holy, Holy, Holy*" include the phrase "*though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see.*" I don't know how many other stories Jesus would have "interpreted" to his companions on the road that night - a safe bet would have been chapter 37 of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, the story of the valley of dry bones.

In that story God asks Ezekiel "*mortal, can these bones live*". Ezekiel is guarded in his response - "*O sovereign Lord, you alone know.*" Yes, God alone knows – for God alone can make sinners repentant, the repentant confident of forgiveness, and the forgiven confident that truly, "*precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.*" Precious, and like their forgiver... those he's forgiven, alive in grace now and forever – are truly with him...today...in paradise. AMEN