

Word and Sacrament

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 | Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17 | 1 Peter 1:17-23 | Luke 24:13-35

LUKE 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' ¹⁹ He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' ²⁵ Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² 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?' ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty. It's a tough word at this particular moment in history. When will this unprecedented time of restriction be over? Will the virus be beat? When? What will it take? What will the cost be? In terms of life? Economically? When will the economy restart? How fast will it recover? And even if we get through all of those, we can go back to the old uncertainties of how Brexit is going roll out and how exactly is Biden going to lose what should be an unlosable election?

Uncertainty. It is our new way of life.

It's easy to feel like things are hopeless when the next step, the next answer, the next project, the next month, are so very unclear. It's a bit how I imagine those two disciples in our gospel reading must have felt.

1. THE STORY

In many ways, our Gospel reading is a familiar passage, the road to Emmaus. But this is no mere travel narrative. In terms of classical drama, the tension of the passage emerges almost immediately. These disciples were walking along with Jesus, but *“their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”*¹ They are not alone in not knowing what they don’t know. If you read the passage before ours—the report of the empty tomb—you will know that the disciples have not yet understood the significance of what has happened. The women report the empty tomb, but the disciples treat it as an *“idle tale,”* and in the words of the author, *“they did not believe them.”*² It is no surprise, then, that these disciples on the road are talking about the arrest and execution of their friend, Jesus, the astounding report they heard from the women, how some of their own went to investigate the empty tomb, and yet only concluding: *“but they did not see him.”* It betrays a kind of sceptical hopelessness.³ They are retreating from Jerusalem, perplexed at best—but most likely moving on after the cause has been lost. They did not yet believe. They did not yet understand. They had not yet recognized that Jesus is alive and was, at that moment, among them.

2. WORD

But they should have. And what happens next is important. It doesn’t yet resolve the tension of their lack of recognition, but it picks up a significant theme in Luke to demonstrate that, in fact, they should have recognized him. They should have known he would rise from the dead. In verse 25, Jesus shows his exasperation: *“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”*⁴ He then shows them in all the Scriptures—from Moses to the Prophets—how his suffering and glory—his death and resurrection—have been known. It’s an incredible moment—Jesus was not just demonstrating the fundamental unity of the whole Bible—how the Old Testament anticipates gospel—but he showed these disciples that they should have recognized the resurrected Christ because of their understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s a theme that goes all the way back to chapter 1, when Zechariah was prophesying how God has raised up *“a mighty saviour,”* just *“as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.”*⁵ It will also appear once more in this chapter, when the risen Christ will ‘open the minds’ of his disciples, showing that the law of Moses, the prophets, and the writings all foretold his death and resurrection.⁶ In other words, the author of this Gospel consistently argues that followers of Christ should recognize him and should believe in his death and resurrection—the gospel itself—on the basis of the Scriptures. And yet, the disciples didn’t understand. We find out when they discuss it later in the passage that their hearts were *“burning within”* them as he was *“opening the Scriptures”* to them.⁷ But something else was still necessary in this case. Uncertainty, for the moment, persisted.

¹ Luke 24:16.

² Luke 24:11.

³ Luke 24:21. This is especially clear in their statement about how they *had* hoped Jesus was going to be the one to redeem Israel (also a theme in Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles). See, for example, Acts 1:6.

⁴ Luke 24:25.

⁵ Luke 1:69-70. This theme emerges again in the next chapter when Jesus, at the age of 12, is found in the temple and impressing the teachers of the Law (Luke 2:46-47). Again, it shows up in chapter 4 when Jesus enters the synagogue, reads from Isaiah, and claims: *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:16-21). Throughout this Gospel and the second volume, Acts, the fulfilment of the Scriptures in Christ is a major theme.

⁶ Luke 24:44-47. Here, the anticipation of death and resurrection was the basis of mission: *‘that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.’*

⁷ Luke 24:32.

3. SACRAMENT

The travelling party finally arrived at the edge of town. But the day was over, the physical journey complete for the moment—and the theological journey unfinished. Jesus consented to have dinner with them as evening approached. And then he did something normal, yet provocative. *“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”*⁸ In Luke’s Gospel and his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, this is phrasing is particular. This combination of words—being at table, bread, breaking, blessing—appears together a handful of times.⁹ It’s a way of referencing the meal which became the Lord’s Supper. And what happens when these disciples participate in a pseudo-Eucharistic meal with Jesus? *“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”*¹⁰ The dramatic tension is resolved in the recognition. The author even emphasizes it through repetition in our last verse, as the disciples report their experience and *“how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”*¹¹ Uncertainty now turned to certainty.

4. WORD AND SACRAMENTS FOR US

The argument of the author is, I think, clear: The Scriptures and the Eucharist, Word and Sacrament, should point us to Christ Jesus. Let me say this again: Both the Bible and the bread (and cup) should help us to recognize and believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord.

Indeed, these ideas go together. For me personally, these ideas go together. As many of you know, I did not grow up in the Church of England or any Anglican tradition. My life before was fairly evenly split between the Baptist and Presbyterian worlds. And if you’re interested in how it is that I became an Anglican, I’m happy to tell you the full story sometime. There were three or four triggers. But one of them was this very notion, in fact. It was realizing that in the Scriptures, the practice of Communion was intimately tied to preaching of the Word and the revelation of Christ Jesus in both. If Christ is meant to be recognized in all the Scriptures, then we must give ourselves to the careful study and proclamation of those Scriptures. And likewise, if the gospel is proclaimed from the Word, then a first and right application should be participation in the Table of Christ. For in these two, Christ is recognised and we may renew our faith in him, having certainty in the things of Christ.¹²

This, friends, is how the Anglican tradition defines the Church, in fact. It’s not surprising in a moment like this—when so many people across the world are prevented from gathering in person and are instead meeting online—that some are raising the question of how we define the Church. It’s not the building, of course. It’s the people. But it is people doing what, exactly?

⁸ Luke 24:30.

⁹ Some combination of these words appears in Luke and Acts several times: Luke 22:19 and 24:30; Acts 2:46, 20:7, 20:11, and 27:35. The instance in 22:19 is especially clear: *“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”* The instance in Acts 20:7, where Paul spoke to the Christians in Troas, seems to tie it to the corporate worship service on the first day of the week. Interestingly, Paul uses this same combination of words when he describes the institution of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor 11:24 (cf., 1 Cor 10:16).

¹⁰ Luke 24:31.

¹¹ Luke 24:335.

¹² This is, indeed, the very agenda of the author communicated in the prologue. He hopes that the recipient, Theophilus, will “have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4, ESV).

Article XIX of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (the primary statement of doctrine of the Church of England) defines the Church rather simply:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men [and women], in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance...¹³

The Church is the group of people that give themselves to the Word and to the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Why? The article doesn't specify, but Luke's Gospel provides a wonderful answer: So that Christ may be recognised, or be known, by his people.

This is a great opportunity, friends, to think through these things. This modified delivery of the Word of God and this extended fast from the Communion Table should help to put these ideas—the Word and the Sacraments—in perspective. It should help us to put the very essence of the Church in perspective. This time of restriction should draw us back to study the Scriptures more earnestly, and long for the Table more deeply. But let us not now or when we return to routine, ever miss that to which they point: our Saviour, Christ Jesus. Let us recognize him. Let us have certainty about him in this uncertain time.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with a few lines from one of my favourite hymns, the poetic words of Samuel John Stone:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word:

He goes on later to add:

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.¹⁴

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, may we study the Scriptures more earnestly, and long for the Table more deeply, that we may see your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹³ Article 19, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*.

¹⁴ Samuel John Stone (1839-1900), *The Church's One Foundation*, verses 1 and 4.