

“The Sunset Road that turned to Dawn”

Luke 24:13-35 ¹

The first church I served as pastor was a small county-seat congregation in Nicholas County, Kentucky. We moved to the town of Carlisle, population 1,800, from Dallas-Ft. Worth, and it felt as though we had gone back in time twenty-five years.

One of the many, many cultural changes that we encountered in that move was our introduction to “the Blackberry Festival.” This annual event took over the town square for a week every summer, and I had never seen anything like it before. We’d been in Carlisle for about a month when I wrote these words in July, 1980

“One night last week my family and I decided that we would check out The Blackberry Festival. I was interested in what it would be like, because many people in town had warned me about it. As we walked around the courthouse yard I found myself looking not at the amusements that were available, but at the people there. Peoplewatching must be a popular pastime, because many folk were watching the festival from the windows of their upstairs apartments around the square, and there was quite a crowd sitting on the sidewalk of Main Street – just watching.

“We saw several people we knew, and we enjoyed talking with them for a while in the middle of all the activity. But most of all I saw people I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. Some of them must’ve been from nearby towns and cities, for they did not have the mark of the fields and sun upon them. Others were clearly familiar with the warm smell of fresh earth and understood things that grow.

“As I watched them all, I found myself thinking of the song that goes ‘All the lonely people – where do they all come from?’ And I remembered that every single person there was—and is—of incalculable value in God’s eyes. I wondered how we could tell them the Good News of God’s love in such a way that they could really hear it.”

Well, such were my city-slicker observations of my first Blackberry Festival long ago; and it was after a very similar festival that the events we consider this morning took place. Passover was one of the greatest festivals of the Jews. Every Jewish man was required to attend, and so Passover drew huge crowds to Jerusalem every year. Usually, it was a happy time, but this year it hadn’t been so great.

This year, a popular itinerant preacher named Jesus, a carpenter from the village of Nazareth, had been arrested, railroaded through a mock trial, and then had been executed by the authorities. And while those actions had been applauded by some, the events left most of the city in a state of shock. After the Romans crucified Jesus, the festival just wasn’t the same.

Just as many people came from surrounding towns to the Blackberry Festival, many people traveled from other places to the Passover Festival, and the text that Tim read earlier picked up the story with two men walking home from the Festival in the late afternoon and talking sadly about all that had happened this year.

These two men were apparently followers—or at least admirers—of Jesus. They were not among the Twelve (which had now become eleven), but they were known to the Twelve. Tradition

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 1, 2018. Resurrection Sunday.

has it that these two men had been among the seventy-two that Jesus once sent out on a preaching mission.²

The two men talked forlornly as they walked into the gathering gloom. The crucifixion had not changed their opinion that Jesus was a prophet, but it had shattered their hope that He was the Messiah. Their thoughts were as somber as the silent nightfall.

As they walked, they overtook a Stranger, and He joined their conversation. Dr. Luke, with the advantage of hindsight, tells us that the Stranger was Jesus Himself – but the men did not recognize Him. Mark reported that Jesus appeared to them “in a different form” (Mark 16:12); but however it happened, they didn’t recognize Him. I wonder how many times Jesus has come and still comes to us, and we don’t recognize Him, either? (Matthew 25:42-45).

As these two men explained to the Stranger what had happened at the festival, they talked about how they had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah. But now He was dead, and that could never be. They mentioned that the tomb where Jesus had been placed had been found empty, but they attached no significance to that. To add grave robbers to the story was just another sad part of the whole tragic affair.

And then Jesus began to explain to them what had been said throughout the Scriptures concerning Himself. He told them that Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection—He confirmed that the tomb was indeed empty—were part of an Eternal Plan. These events were not added at the last moment, introduced as a sort of desperate remedy when things had gotten out of hand. No, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection had been woven tightly into the fabric of creation since the world began, by the One who had done all the weaving.

The Stranger told them that this Plan was old, as time was old, when the foundations of the earth were young. The Plan began to take shape when God resolutely set out to do the most magnificent thing that even God could think of doing.

In the Beginning, God had set out to fashion a form of life so wonderful that it contained the magnificence of God’s own Life within it. On and on God worked to give humans grandeur and glory, and to give us freedom, too. Then, for ages and ages, God told us by prophet and by martyr how to live in a world like this one, but we stubbornly set our wills against Him and went our own way.

The Stranger’s tale went from prophet to prophet and from text to text, showing how God’s Love had come to earth in the person of Jesus, and that Jesus had chosen to die because of the Joy He knew would be His afterward (Hebrews 12:2). If Jesus had not died, the Stranger said, and if Jesus had not been victorious over death, nothing else would have mattered much. “*Wasn’t it necessary,*” He asked, “*for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?*” (Luke 24:26).

The three men had now been walking and talking for a long time, and they were approaching Emmaus, the village where the two men lived. Since it was nearly dark, the men insisted that the Stranger stay for dinner. The Stranger agreed, and as He gave thanks to God and they began to eat, the two men understood at last that this was Jesus, Himself . . . and then He simply disappeared.

² Luke 10:1-17

Just a few days before, Jesus had sat at another table and had broken bread, saying that such a meal must be continued in memory of what He was about to do for us; and it was at the table once again that they saw Him, but now, the Cross was past, and the tomb was empty!

Cleopas and his friend had found themselves on a Sunset Road – a road of darkness leading to despair. *And then Jesus came*, and helped them to see that the Crucifixion and Resurrection were not the End.

Rather than being the End, these events were actually the dawning of a New and More Glorious Age than anyone had ever dared to imagine or to hope for. And when the two men had glimpsed that Dawn, had recognized their Risen Lord, and had felt the Joy of Resurrection for the very first time, they could not wait to share it – they rushed back to Jerusalem in the night.

Although we know the Story, it's important for us to see clearly that **only the personal appearance of the risen Christ convinced anyone that He was alive.** The empty tomb did not convince either friend or foe. To the apostles, the report of Mary Magdalene and the other women that the tomb was empty and that they had seen Angels sounded like complete nonsense (Luke 24:11).

My friends, the faith of the early church was not founded on the *negative* evidence of an empty tomb, but on the *positive* evidence of the living Lord, who appeared to many. As Paul would later describe it,

*³ For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that **Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that **he was buried**, that **he was raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that **he appeared** to Cephas, then to the Twelve. ⁶ Then **he appeared** to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then **he appeared** to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, **he also appeared to me** (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).*

When the two men arrived at the apostles' hiding place, breathless and amazed, they learned that Jesus had already appeared to Peter. We know nothing about that encounter, and it must remain one of the great untold stories of the world, but how beautiful it is that the first man to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection—He had appeared to women first of all—was to Peter, who had openly denied Him!

But to return to the beginning – I'm intrigued by the failure of these men to recognize Jesus; and I wonder what might be the things today that blur our vision of our Lord? I suggest to you that we fail to see Jesus primarily because of two things: (1) we are not sensitive to the present, to what happens right before our eyes; and (2), that we are simultaneously too preoccupied with the present! This sounds like a contradiction, but I don't believe it is. Let me try to explain what I mean.

It seems to me that quite often, you and I are not fully sensitive to the present moment. Our tendency is to ruminate over things that have already happened, or to imagine ourselves at some point in the future. Perhaps a little bit like Walter Mitty and his secret life,³ we picture ourselves doing great deeds. We may even imagine ourselves as Superheroes, and our simple (even if very busy) lives seem quite dull in comparison.

³ James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," *The New Yorker*, 1939.

And that, I think, is both the problem and the answer. Our perceptions are too limited. We fail to see God as God comes to us every day. Elizabeth Browning was right when she wrote that “earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”⁴

I think God often comes to us in the form of a child. Many years ago, when our son, Nathan, was a boy, I was watching a religious movie—*Peter and Paul*⁵—when Nathan stood by me and asked, “Daddy, why do you want to watch TV instead of playing with me?”

I’m sorry to say that my compassionate, fatherly response was something rather like “Don’t bother me. I’m being religious!” God came to me, but I wasn’t listening.

My friend and teacher, Wayne Oates, often noted the importance of “practicing the absence of elsewhere-ness.” When was the last time that you felt the Presence of God in the face of a child, in the wind, in the clouds, in a leaf, in a flower, in a sunrise . . . and really paid attention to and welcomed that Presence? Cleopas finally recognized Jesus when He blessed the food and served the evening meal – something very ordinary, indeed.

Not only do we tend to be insensitive to God’s Presence in everyday life, even as we dream of greatness somewhere else, but we tend to be too preoccupied with the ordinary at the same time. The two are the sides of the same coin.

We become so engrossed in picking blackberries that we fail to see the fire of God. We’re caught up in making a living, in paying the bills, in getting spring cleaning done, in getting the kids to ball practice. There are taxes to be calculated, costumes to make for school, the grass is growing every day, and the mower is broken.

We’re busy, yes, but we need to remember that Jesus told us to “*Be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. . . . Concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. . . . This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*” (Matthew 24:36-44).

My friends, the Message of Resurrection Day is not only that Jesus has risen from the dead. The Message of Redemption also is that **Jesus is coming again**. Do you *believe* that? Do you *live* like you believe that? Is every day charged with the expectancy that **this might be the day**? This could be the dawning of that grand and glorious day when Jesus comes for His own! How then, can this day be ordinary and unimportant?

The beautiful thing about Jesus’ Resurrection is that it turns our real news, our fake news, our discouragement and our despair into the dawning of a New Age! Even as Jesus did with the two men on the Emmaus Road, He still comes to us to transform our sunsets into dawn. The Resurrection is not simply a fact for historians and theologians. The Resurrection is a firm place to stand when all the world seems bent on going to pieces.

A group of laymen went to a small Indiana church to complete the renovations on their sanctuary. For weeks, the building had been lit only by artificial light, because the spaces for the windows were covered by the exterior boards that still had to be cut out for the windows. Finally, things were ready, and the window openings were cut out. Late that afternoon, one of the members of the little church hurried from his job to see how things were coming along. He

⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 1917.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_and_Paul

rushed into the building and stopped short when he saw sunlight streaming into the sanctuary. He simply stood speechless, and wept.

My friends, there is nothing that can take the place of sunlight – even our best light sources are, in the end, artificial. And there is nothing that can take the place of our Risen Lord in your life. Every other source of Purpose and Hope is artificial. It's fake news. Nothing else—no-thing and no one but Jesus—can carry the weight of life. **He, and He alone, is the Hope and the Anchor for our lives** (Hebrews 6:19).

When we gather around the Lord's Table, as we will do in a moment, we gather to know and to celebrate Jesus, who is very much alive and very much present with us. We know Him as the Essence of our being and the Center of our Fellowship. We come to this Table remembering that Jesus told us, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them*" (Matthew 18:20).

When Jesus' resurrected physical body burst forth from the grave, His spiritual body, the Church, was also given life. And the witness of our joyous communion with Him and with one another is to this day the greatest testimony to the Resurrection.

Amen, and Amen.

¹³ Now that same day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ Together they were discussing everything that had taken place. ¹⁵ And while they were discussing and arguing, Jesus himself came near and began to walk along with them. ¹⁶ But they were prevented from recognizing him.

¹⁷ Then he asked them, "What is this dispute that you're having with each other as you are walking??" And they stopped walking and looked discouraged.

¹⁸ The one named Cleopas answered him, "Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that happened there in these days??"

¹⁹ "What things?" he asked them.

So they said to him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet powerful in action and speech before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. ²¹ But we were hoping that he was the one who was about to redeem Israel. Besides all this, it's the third day since these things happened.

²² Moreover, some women from our group astounded us. They arrived early at the tomb, ²³ and when they didn't find his body, they came and reported that they had seen a vision of angels who said 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 didn't see him."

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish and slow you are to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory??" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures.

²⁸ They came near the village where they were going, and he gave the impression that he was going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him, "Stay with us, because it's almost evening, and now the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ It was as he reclined at the table with them that he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us??"

³³ That very hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem. They found the Eleven and those with them gathered together, ³⁴ who said, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!?" ³⁵ Then they began to describe what had happened on the road and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. ³⁶ As they were saying these things, he himself stood in their midst. He said to them, "Peace to you!"