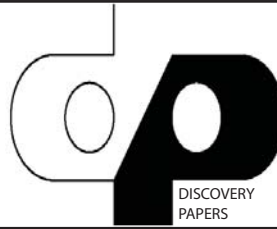


HEARTS AFLAME

EASTER SUNDAY



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Luke 24:13-33
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Luke 24:13-33

In one second, everything had changed. That moment became a landmark. There will forever be only two chapters in your life story. History is divided into BEFORE and AFTER.

I'm talking, of course, about the first time I arrived in Northern California. I was in high school and had just moved from Connecticut to Houston, Texas. I was visiting a friend that had moved to Woodside. That was the moment I fell in love with this area. *Before* and *After*.

Or, I could be talking about that day in December 1999 when I said "I do." Nothing would ever be the same after that moment. *Before* and *After*.

Or maybe I was talking about the day that I held my first child in my arms. The first time that word "daddy" actually applied to me. *Before* and *After*.

There are moments that define our lives. Sometimes things happen that change the way we see ourselves and the way we see the world. The past looks different and the future takes new shape. *Before* and *After*.

In case you're curious, if you do a web search for "before and after," you are likely to find three categories of things: Weight loss stories, plastic surgery stories, and stories about homeless dogs that have been rescued. I'm not sure why before and after homeless dog pictures are so popular, but apparently they are.

Happy Easter Sunday. This day is the hinge on which the whole Christian story rests. Today defines the before and after of God's work in the world. Today we celebrate the resurrection from the dead of a carpenter from a backwoods village two thousand years ago.

But the story we'll be reflecting on this morning begins not with that man, but with two people whose lives changed because of him. It was later in the evening after the tomb was discovered empty. These

two people were there to see Jesus executed. They were in Jerusalem a few days later and heard reports of an empty tomb.

That night they had a conversation with someone, as they walked home, that changed their lives. That was the moment that marked their lives into "before" and "after". That moment set their hearts on fire. All the dots were connected. They understood and felt and experienced something powerful.

This story is found in Luke 24:13-33. Mostly, I'll just be telling the story. It's a great story that I think we'll be able to resonate with. But at three different points, someone asks a significant question. These questions become milestones in the story. The first two are asked of the travelers. The final is asked by them.

When we encounter these questions, we're going to let them be *our* questions. We're going to see if any part of this story is our story. We'll think about what's going in our lives. We'll think about how we try to make sense of everything in the world around us. And, we'll think about what helps us to move forward in our lives.

So let's meet these two travelers and see the moment that divided their lives into *before* and *after*.

A road trip "discussion"

The story begins with a road trip conversation. Let's read **Luke 24:13-14**:

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

We need a little context. "Two of them" refers to two of the disciples. We aren't immediately told who they are, but later in the story we find out that one of them is named Cleopas. John's gospel features a man with a similar name who was married to a woman

named Mary, who was at the cross when Jesus died. This is a bit of speculation, but some commentators believe that these two travelers were that couple: Mary and Clopas. For the sake of filling out the story, let's assume that's the case.

Mary and Clopas are going to a village called Emmaus. The fact that we don't know anything about this village tells us a lot: it wasn't important. It must have been a small village, not well known, and not significant. There wouldn't be much of a reason to be going to Emmaus unless you lived there; so, Clopas and Mary were probably walking home.

Imagine a married couple, on a two or three hour walk home after a tiring week of festivities and confusing political events in Jerusalem. What do married people do on their way home when they are exhausted? The next verse says they were "*discussing together*" what had happened that week. That word is usually translated "*debating*" or "*arguing*."

When I got married, I thought that healthy couples weren't supposed to have "fights." So my wife and I had "serious conversations." That's what we called them. I'm pretty sure that's the kind of "discussion" that Clopas and Mary are having here.

The story opens on a private moment between a husband and wife. Not a public gathering. Not dressed up for Easter service. They are both tired and confused and just want to get home.

The familiar stranger

Clopas and Mary probably weren't walking alone. The Passover feast had just wrapped up in Jerusalem, when the population of the city grew from 30,000 to 150,000 for the festivities. There would have been a handful of people on the same road leaving Jerusalem. As Mary and Clopas walk, one of the other travelers catches up to them and starts to chat. He seems vaguely familiar but they don't recognize him.

Luke 24:15-19a:

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only

visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" ¹⁹And he said to them, "What things?"

The familiar stranger asks them, "*What are you talking about?*" He really doesn't seem to know. This is like showing up in Ferguson, Missouri and walking up to a crowd of people holding signs and asking them, "What's going on?" On that day, just outside Jerusalem, there was only one thing that anyone was talking about. The stranger's question stopped them dead in their tracks. "They stood still, looking sad" (Luke 24:17b). How do you begin to explain what happened over the past few days in Jerusalem?

How would you have explained what happened in Ferguson, Missouri? Where do you start? American slavery? The Civil War? The civil rights movement? Violent video games and a media-saturated culture, and institutional racism, and patterns of poverty and discrimination in urban areas?

How are Clopas and Mary supposed to answer this familiar stranger? I think they are sad because they don't know where to begin. So much has happened. It's overwhelming. They can't even get their minds around it. They are confused. They are worried.

When you greet someone and they ask, "How are you doing?", do you ever panic a little bit? Do you ever feel like you have no idea how to answer this person or where to even start? Do they really want to know? What would they do if I told them what was really going on? Should I talk about my project at work, or my dysfunctional family, or the phone call last night with my mother, or the anger that I can't seem to control?

Usually, we do none of that and just say "Fine." Or lately, the answer for most people is "Busy."

But imagine yourself walking home after a long and tiring week and a familiar stranger asks you, "What are you talking about?" Imagine that he really wants to know. Imagine that for some reason, you start telling him. What would you say? *What are you talking about?*

Where are you? I'd like to invite you to stop for a moment. Imagine Jesus sitting down next to you. He asks you in a gentle voice, "What's going on?" Take a moment and reflect. On this Sunday morning, what is on your mind? What are you thinking about? Worried about? Excited about? Confused about?

A Confusing Story

This familiar stranger seems to be genuinely interested in what Clopas and Mary are talking about, so they begin to explain it to. Here is the story they tell.

Luke 24:19b-24:

And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up 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 happened.²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning,²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even 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 him they did not see.”

The story they tell is about a poor carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth. Their story has a very clear arc. First, this man was interesting. Clopas and Mary thought he might be somebody. They thought he might be “the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21a). But then Jesus was killed by their own leaders. The story began with hope that became disappointment.

But then the story got weird. Some women said they couldn’t find Jesus’ body. They claimed that an angel said Jesus was alive. The other disciples sent some men to verify this information, but the men couldn’t find the body either and they didn’t see an angel. First hope, then disappointment, and now confusion.

Hope. Disappointment. Confusion. That’s the shape of Clopas and Mary’s story.

But there is a lot more to their story. If you arrived in Ferguson and were told that a white police officer shot a black juvenile, you would know the backstory about race relations, law enforcement, and the socio-economics of urban America. So what’s the backstory here?

The hope that Clopas and Mary felt was that Jesus of Nazareth was going to fix things for Israel. “Redeeming Israel” meant rising up and throwing off the empire of Rome. Rome ruled their cities, they

collected exorbitant taxes, and they ruled through fear, intimidation, and violence. You could never predict when a Roman soldier would turn your life upside down. Mary and Clopas were hopeful because they thought Jesus of Nazareth would fix their problems; he would end the pain.

But then Jesus died. He was not just dead, but crucified. Jesus didn’t fix their problems. He didn’t beat Rome; Rome beat him. Jesus didn’t end the pain. The pain ended him.

Clopas and Mary probably felt stupid for ever having hoped in the first place. Why did they think anything could ever change? It’s that feeling when you thought the interview went well, but it’s been two weeks and the company isn’t returning your phone calls. Clopas and Mary were disappointed and humiliated.

Now, an empty tomb and a vision of angels—What does that mean? Should they be excited? Should they be angry that someone stole Jesus’ body? Should they be suspicious of some trick by the Romans? What would it even mean if he were alive? Could Jesus come back and beat Rome now? How would that work?

We often think that the first Easter was a time of celebration: “Hooray! Jesus is alive!” But in reality, it was a day of confusion. The news leaked out slowly and even once people found out that Jesus could be alive, they didn’t know what it meant.

Frederick Buechner, a Christian novelist, describes Emmaus this way:

“[Emmaus is] the place that we go in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’”¹

Have you ever felt this way? Disappointed. Confused. Tired. It makes no difference anyway.

Clopas and Mary are going home in despair and confusion. They thought that Jesus of Nazareth had come to fix their problems. But he didn’t do that. Jesus of Nazareth didn’t live up to their story. That left them confused and sad and not sure where to go next.

Different Stories

So the familiar stranger hears their sadness and confusion and comforts them...

Except that's not what happened. In reality, the stranger says they are foolish and they should know better. Clopas and Mary have managed to get the story all wrong even though they've been hearing it all of their lives.

Luke 24:25-27:

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

This man who walked up to Clopas and Mary tells them that the story they had assumed, understood, expected, and become disappointed in was not the real story. They wanted something from the world—from God—that no one ever promised to them.

The problem wasn't that the events of the week didn't fit their story. The problem was that their story didn't fit with the events of the week. The familiar stranger asks them, "Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer and enter into his glory?" He's asking them, "Don't you understand the real story? Why are you so convinced that Jesus of Nazareth didn't live up to your story? What if your story didn't live up to him?"

First, we are asked about what is really going on. Then, we are asked about which story we actually believe—our second question. . What do you assume and understand and expect about the world? *What story do you believe?*

We all have a story that we believe which helps us to make sense of the world. These stories connect all the dots in our lives. They help us to interpret what happens. The stories explain the rules and help us to make decisions, both big and small.

There are a lot of stories out there. "Work hard and you'll eventually succeed." "Follow your heart and you'll find happiness." "Get the best education so that you can get the best job." "Find true love and no matter what else happens, you'll have someone to share it with." "Go to church every Sunday and your life will work out the way you want it to."

With so many stories available, the problem is that we don't know which one to believe. How do you pick? None of the stories answer all the questions we have. Each story makes sense of a few things, but

leaves other things unclear. If God is real, why is there so much pain? If he isn't real, where did beauty come from? How do you pick your story?

What often happens is that you end up believing a story until it fails you. You think that working hard will get you what you want until you lose your job for no reason. You think that romance will make you complete until your marriage starts to fall apart. You think that going to church will protect you until depression strikes.

A lot of stories work just fine until crisis hits. Then what?

Most of us aren't prepared to suffer. Very few of the stories that are available really help us to handle suffering. When we do suffer, we don't know what to do. We are stopped in our tracks like Clopas and Mary. We are sad. We are confused. Where do we go next?

We need a story that helps us to make sense of pain. When I first started preparing this sermon, I was thinking about the co-pilot who crashed a plane into the Alps, killing 150 people. But now that story is old news since gunmen entered a college in Kenya, killing just as many. What is going on in our world? We need a story that makes sense of pain.

We have plenty of stories about overcoming pain and avoiding hardship and conquering suffering. But what happens when it can't be overcome, avoided, or conquered? How do you make sense of all the pain in the world?

The story that Clopas and Mary had believed didn't prepare them for a hero who was killed. They didn't have a story to make sense of that.

But the familiar stranger told them a new kind of story. He went back to the same words that they had been reading their whole lives. He showed them how those words told a story that made sense of suffering. The familiar stranger asked why Clopas and Mary hadn't understood that "it was necessary for the Christ to suffer these things" (Luke 24:26). He told them a story that required suffering.

This story recognized all that was wrong with the world. Injustice, oppression, abuse, inequality, immorality, rivalry, and war filled the place where God used to walk in the cool of the day. The Creator's heart broke with every tear of his creation. But he didn't just fix it. He entered into the suffering himself. The hero of this story experienced injustice, oppression, abuse, and execution. This hero was bruised and pierced and humiliated and killed.

The familiar stranger told Mary and Clopas a beautiful story that made sense of suffering.

An Interested Pair

But Mary and Clopas aren't sure. It had been a long week for them. This was a strange story. They are intrigued, but not yet convinced. They are drawn to this story, but not yet ready to accept it. Read what happens next.

Luke 24:28-29:

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther,²⁹ but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them.

The familiar stranger wraps up his explanation as they get close to Emmaus, but then becomes coy. He pretends that he is headed farther. He puts the ball back in their court. He leaves it up to Mary and Clopas to decide whether to pursue his story.

And they want more. They are intrigued. This version of the story is interesting. So they ask him to stay with them. They make the move.

The Moment of Truth

And so he agrees. The familiar stranger comes to their house. He sits down to eat with them. Mary and Clopas must have been impressed with him because even though he is the guest in their house, they allow him to play the role of the host.

Luke 24:30-32:

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

The familiar stranger takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. He passes it out. This is when everything comes together.

The bread that God rained from the sky for his people in the wilderness. The unleavened bread they

ate when they escaped Egypt. The holy bread that King David ate. The bread that Jesus of Nazareth multiplied for a hungry crowd. Hadn't Jesus said he was the bread of life? The Passover celebration only a few nights earlier when he broke the matzo and said, "This bread is my body." In this moment, all the dots are connected.

It's time for a vocabulary lesson in ancient Greek drama. This point in the story is the *anagnorisis*—the moment of recognition. This was a common feature in Greek stories—a single moment when someone's true identity is understood and everything about the story takes a different shape.

Contemporary stories have similar realizations. It's the moment in the movie *The Sixth Sense* when we realize that the counselor of the little boy who sees dead people is actually already dead. It's Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* revealing, "Luke, I am your father."

The power of the *anagnorisis* is that it makes you rethink the whole story. In that moment, you think back over everything that has already happened, now that you have some new information. The *anagnorisis* changes the past by reinterpreting everything. If it happens at the end of a movie, you want to watch the whole thing again, now that you understand.

Jesus' story had made sense of suffering, but it hadn't ended with suffering. This familiar stranger said that the Messiah had to suffer, but then enter his glory. Now, they had seen him alive. Now, they knew that Jesus of Nazareth had done this. He had died, but he had been raised from the dead.

In this moment, everything clicked. Here was a story that made sense of suffering, but it also gave Mary and Clopas hope. This was a story that recognized the suffering and pain and injustice of the world, but saw it redeemed. If that was possible, it changed everything. If suffering could actually have meaning... If pain could have purpose... If death could lead to life...

Most of us aren't prepared to suffer. But if we're not prepared to suffer, then we're not willing to hope. We're scared of it. In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the inmate Red tells his friend Andy, "Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane."²

If you aren't a follower of Jesus, you might be thinking that this is a great story, but it's only a story. Hope is great. But a false hope is worse than no hope at all.

This is probably what Mary and Clopas thought at first. They heard this story when the familiar stranger talked about entering into glory, but they didn't believe it until they encountered Jesus. It wasn't until they saw that this hope was real that they allowed themselves to believe it.

The hope of this story isn't real until you've encountered Jesus. Once you see him, you can look back on your story with new perspective. Things start to make sense. What about you? Have you encountered Jesus?

Maybe you're encountering Jesus here this morning. Maybe you encountered him a while back, but you let yourself forget and push it away. Or maybe, like Mary and Clopas, you encountered Jesus but you didn't recognize him.

There are many different ways to encounter Jesus. I encountered him through the love and acceptance of a high school youth group. I know people who have encountered him through miraculous healing. Others have had deep connection through prayer or visions. Some have seen their lives transformed overnight, being saved from addiction or despair. Others have seen Jesus work gradually and patiently on deep issues in their life.

Having an encounter with Jesus is going to look different for each one of us. That's why we sometimes miss it. We hear one person's story and think, "Well, I didn't encounter Jesus in that way, so I guess I've never encountered him."

Mary and Clopas asked each other, "Weren't our hearts burning within us when he was talking to us?" They thought back, and in hindsight realized what was happening. Think back on your experiences. When has your heart been burning within you? Could that have been Jesus and you didn't realize it at the time? *What sets your heart aflame?*

If we live in a world of competing stories, how are we going to choose? How do we know which one is true? Maybe the story that makes sense of suffering and gives us hope is the real story. Maybe the story that sets our hearts aflame is actually true. What sets your heart aflame?

Maybe this morning gives you the perspective you need to look back over your life and see those times that Jesus was walking alongside of you. Maybe you didn't realize it at the time. You might have been intrigued. You might have been curious. But now

you can see when Jesus came into your pain and disappointment and confusion and spoke words of hope.

What sets your heart aflame? Have you experienced words of hope from Jesus?

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Today we remember that Jesus is alive. Death has been defeated. Pain has been redeemed. Although we don't always know the meaning of all the suffering in the world, we know that someone does. We know a hero who suffered in order to bring us hope.

Easter is about the hope that comes when suffering is redeemed. This is what sets our hearts on fire: Hope that whatever crisis we encounter won't consume us; hope that pain can lead to joy; hope that life can follow death.

What are you talking about? Jesus wants to know what is going on and walk with you in your confusion.

What story do you believe? Does it actually prepare you for life and love and beauty and death?

What sets your heart aflame? Have you encountered Jesus? Will you believe and follow this kind of a Savior?

Back to Jerusalem

Clopas and Mary believed in Jesus, and everything changed in that moment. They left Jerusalem in disappointment and confusion and despair. The one they had hoped in had failed to live up to their story. But then they met someone who gave them a different story. And that changed their lives. Let's read how they responded. "And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem" (Luke 24:33a).

Clopas and Mary went back to the beginning—they returned to Jerusalem. They had a new story that made sense of pain and gave them hope. It allowed them to go back to Jerusalem. Their hope allowed them to go back into the place of pain. This new story—the true story—gave them courage to enter into pain and find hope.

Look around at the world we in which we live. We live in a broken world of pain and hurt and injustice. We need a story that sees that pain and gives us hope. The Silicon Valley, where we live, is full of ambition. It is full of speculation. It's full of presumption and aspiration and dreams and drive. But what it needs is hope. What it needs is for hearts to be set aflame by the hope of a suffering Messiah who rose from the dead.

And Silicon Valley needs people who have that hope and bring it to others. People who are willing to go back to Jerusalem—back to the place of pain—and bring hope. People who aren't afraid to get dirty, to face their confusion, and in that confusion, to find the hope of Jesus.

In a small way, that's what we will be doing as a congregation in three weeks. On the weekend that we call Beautiful Day, we will move our worship from inside these walls to outside in the community. On that weekend, we'll show our community this story of pain and hope. We'll clean classrooms and paint blacktops and build shelves. All of that work is meant to let people know that hope is possible; to demonstrate that the story of Jesus Christ risen from the dead brings practical hope to those in need.

Once you encounter Jesus, you follow him into the world to bring hope to others.

The story we've encountered this morning is a story worth building your life around. This is a story that sets our hearts on fire. It is the *true* story.

Let Jesus walk alongside you. Let him tell you the real story. Let him reveal himself to you. Open your eyes and believe. Go back to Jerusalem with new perspective and new purpose.

He is risen. He is risen indeed.

(Endnotes)

¹Buechner, Frederick. *The Magnificent Defeat*, Seabury Press, 1966; pg. 85.

²*The Shawshank Redemption*. Dir. Frank Darabont. Perf. Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Bob Gunton, William Sadler, Clancy Brown. Castle Rock, 1999. DVD.