

"THE WALK TO EMMAUS"

TEXT: "While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him" Luke 24: 15, 16.

INTRODUCTION Jesus was crucified on a Friday. On the following Sunday, two of his friends were walking to a little village called Emmaus - about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were absorbed in conversation; their hearts were heavy. As they walked along in the dark shadows of the cross and the events of that Friday, something incredible and unbelievable took place. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. They didn't recognize him, however.

WHY DIDN'T THEY RECOGNIZE HIM Right away our inquisitive minds begin to raise some questions. Why didn't they recognize him? They had known him quite well when he was alive. Did he look entirely different? Had his features changed beyond recognition? Was it something about him or was it something about themselves that strangely blinded them to his presence.

I wonder if part of the reason they didn't recognize him is due to the fact that they weren't looking for him. He was the last person in the world they had expected to see. He was back in Jerusalem - so they thought - dead, buried, sealed in a tomb. They weren't looking for him and it is true in our own experience that we are most likely to see only what we're looking for. If you are not expecting to see a person, if you are in another part of the world, you might not see him if he passed you on the street. If you are not looking for kindness and goodness, you are not likely to see it. And if you are not expecting to see Christ, if you think he is dead and buried, you are not likely to see him or recognize his spirit at work in the world. He was the last person they expected to see, and this may account in part for the fact that they didn't recognize him when they did see him.

GREAT THINGS COME ALONG WHEN WE'RE NOT EXPECTING THEM This incident reminds us of another truth that our experience bears out. Sometimes the great things in life come along when we least expect them. The great things in life can happen when we're not looking for them to happen. Suddenly the incredible and the unbelievable occurred - Jesus came up behind them and joined them in their walk.

Columbus found this to be true; he wasn't looking for a new continent when he set sail from Genoa in 1492. He was simply looking for a new route to an old world. And this sort of thing is true in terms of the relationships of life. So many of them are made not when we go out with any specific intention of making them, but rather when we go along with our daily tasks doing the best we can with life. And then suddenly, the unbelievable and incredible takes place - another human being joins us in our walk through life. Elizabeth Barrett wasn't looking for a husband when Robert Browning burst into her life; she was simply looking for the best kind of life possible as a semi-invalid. And then without any preparation or expectation on her part, there stood Robert Browning - to change the entire course of her life.

These two men on the road to Emmaus weren't looking for Jesus, but He was looking for them. We would do well to keep this other side of life in mind. It doesn't eliminate or cancel the effort that you and I must make toward all the great things in life, but it does make the picture of life more complete when you remember that in addition to the effort and the striving that a person makes, life keeps coming up to you from behind, overwhelming you when you least expect it with things you never dreamed possible, supplementing your efforts with its magnificent gifts.

HE ASKED THEM WHAT THEY WERE DISCUSSING

Jesus proceeded to ask these two men what they were talking about. They were amazed when he asked them and said to him - "you must be the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened". And they began to tell him simply and briefly about all that had occurred.

Their memories probably reached back across the years as they told this stranger about all that had taken place. Perhaps they began, "There was a man" - and what a man! Mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. They told him how the chief priests and rulers delivered him to be crucified.

The next line in the narrative is one of the saddest in the Gospels. "But we were hoping that he was the one who would set us free". All of their hopes and dreams had been shattered on Good Friday. They knew what it was to face disappointment and as we relate this to our lives, we know there are few who go through life without at some point or other having their hopes dashed and shattered. And he who has not learned how to handle disappointment is not really conditioned for life. "We were hoping that he was the one who would set us free".

And that isn't all. They went on to say, "Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive." They told this to some of the men who went immediately to see what had happened. They saw the empty tomb, but they didn't see him. They didn't know whether the body had been stolen by the Romans or by somebody else. All they knew was that the body was gone.

HE BEGAN TO SPEAK TO THEM

Then he began to speak to them. He said to them, "aren't you being rather foolish". "Wasn't it necessary that the Christ should suffer like that? Was there any other way for him to enter into his glory". He didn't give them time to answer the question, but if he had I can imagine what their answer would have been. It wasn't necessary, it wasn't inevitable to them - not at all. Suffering to them - in any shape or form - was a crippling thing and nothing glorious about it, and this particular suffering - so undeserved, so brutal, so cruel, was a curse. Nothing of any good would come of it. It wasn't an entrance into glory of any kind.

Perhaps we would say the same. We have been brought up to believe that success is the way to glory - that suffering and disappointment can be dead end streets in life, that very little of the "glorious" can come out of such. Jesus is saying - no! That it need not be. Suffering is the preface to glory; disappointment is the prelude to discovery.

It is dangerous and difficult, I suppose, for us to look back and analyze the lives and accomplishments of others, but as one thinks of suffering certain questions come to mind. Where would Paradise Lost have been if Milton had not been blind? Or the symphonies of Beethoven if he had not lost his hearing? Or think of Lincoln. This week we observed the 100th anniversary of his death. We think of the man's magnanimous spirit. I wonder if Lincoln would have been the kind of president he was if his life had been entirely free from suffering and disappointment. Or coming nearer to our own time. On Monday, we thought of that day twenty years ago when death claimed another of America's great presidents. Would the leadership of our land in the 1930's and the leadership of the free world in the 1940's been different if Roosevelt had not been touched by polio in the 1920's. Certainly his resolution, his courage, his determination in overcoming the suffering and crippling effects of that disease had something to do with the resolution, the courage, the determination later seen in his years in public office - as a leader of this land and the free world.

And Jesus talked to them about suffering. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory". Is there not a pattern here woven into life's experience - suffering and growth, disappointment and creation. And whatever else these lines say to us, we are reminded of this: at the very moment when they were most bitterly disappointed, they made their most startling discovery. When they thought all was lost, they found going along with them in a different sort of way, the one upon whom they had pinned all their hopes.

THEY REACHED THE VILLAGE

Soon Jesus and his friends reached the village of Emmaus. He was going further, but they asked Him to stay with them. "Abide with us; for it is toward evening and the day is spent. And he went in to tarry with them". This is the way Luke records it.

It was time for supper and when they sat down, the stranger took the bread, gave thanks and brake it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened. They knew him. They recognized him by what he did - not by what he said. Actions, we say, speak louder than words. Certainly it is true.

And these lines remind us of this. You know Christ by what he does - not by his appearance, not by the way he dresses, nor speaks nor the company he keeps. You may meet him outside the church - in the slums of a city where he is helping the poor and needy, in a hospital ward where healing is taking place, in some remote area of the world where a person with the Peace Corps is bringing light and life to those in darkness, in a human rights rally where concern for better schooling, for better jobs, for better housing conditions has brought a group of persons together. You may meet him outside the church. You know him and you recognize his spirit at work in the world by what he does - when you see him sharing the bread of life with people who need it.

They finished supper and went back to Jerusalem imagining, I suppose, that when they got there, they would meet the disciples and tell them something that would stir them to the depths. But when they got there and found the disciples, what do you suppose the disciples said to them. They said, The Lord has appeared to Peter.

And then they told their story - the story of their walk to Emmaus and how a stranger drew near and went with them and how they recognized him when he broke the bread. Luke has given us a beautiful story of the risen Christ - one filled with overtones of meaning for us to consider.

WHAT ABOUT THIS STORY

I would ask you a question. I shall not answer the question, but would offer three comments to help you come to an answer. Is this a true story? Is it a true story, or is it a legend, a myth, a fairy tale? How do you feel about it. What do you think. We might be surprised at the differences of opinion regarding this story to be found in this congregation.

It is a beautiful story, but is it a true story? That's a hard question for an intelligent, sophisticated Christian of the 20th century to answer honestly for in some ways it tends to go against everything that we have been taught to believe and understand about the natural order of things in the universe. It is incredible.

Let me make three comments. Remember that the man who told this story is the same man who told the story of the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. He is the same man who told the story of that baby grown to adulthood, who spoke to the people and told them the story of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He is the same man who, when he tells the story of the crucifixion, says at the end Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for

they know not what they do". Do you think those stories are true? And if you are prepared to accept the first 23 chapters of Luke's Gospel as a reasonable and a believable account of the truth (granted - all of the details may not be absolutely accurate), it seems to me that we are hardly in a position to say that this 24th chapter (in which this story is found) is not without some basis of fact and experience.

My second comment is this. Remember that things are not necessarily untrue or unbelievable because they go beyond the range of your experience. Suppose that 25 years ago someone had told you that a young man 28 years of age made 81 orbits around the earth, covering two million miles in one hundred and nineteen hours and six minutes. Unless you had been one of the scientists introduced to the secrets before they were revealed to the public, you would have said that this was unbelievable and miraculous. But on the 19th of June in 1963, a young man did this very thing. Don't ever be too sure that what seems impossible to you cannot happen. We live in a universe with many secrets, with many things not yet revealed to our complete human understanding.

The third comment, which goes deeper and is harder to put into words, is this: sometimes when your spirit is low, your heart heavy, your hopes seemingly dashed to the ground - a stranger may come up to you. He may listen to you with a sympathetic ear, an understanding heart. In the course of your moments together, he may say something that lifts your spirit, that makes a difference in your life, that opens one door and then another and so on. You may begin to recognize him by some of the unmistakable signs - concern, goodness, kindness, acceptance. And when you do, you will have a fleeting glimpse of the spirit of the living Christ at work. Perhaps then you will know that at the heart of this beautiful story from Luke's Gospel about the risen Christ, there is a core of truth, a fact of experience. And it is this that we come together this hour to celebrate - his spirit is alive in our world to have dealings with our pain, our suffering, our sin, our disappointment and to have ultimate dealing with our death. And this is why we *

LET US PRAY And on this Easter Day, O God, when we celebrate the triumph of the forces of goodness over the forces of darkness, we recall how the spirit of Christ "drew near and went with them". And may his spirit draw near to us and may it go with us as we depart from this place to return to the affairs of the world - sustaining us in all moments of life. Amen

- * "Sing with all the sons of glory, sing the everlasting song. Death and sorrow, earth's dark story, to the former days belong. All around the clouds are breaking, soon the storms of time shall cease, In God's likeness, man awaking, knows the everlasting peace!"