

Revelation on the Road

In the name of our crucified and risen Lord, dear friends in Christ: It's Sunday afternoon. Cleopas and his unnamed companion are walking the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are part of that larger circle of 70 disciples who followed Jesus from the earliest days of his ministry in Galilee. And they've just spent a week riding the wildest emotional rollercoaster imaginable.

On Sunday last they marched behind Jesus as he rode a donkey into the holy city. They were filled with euphoria. They were on top of the world. They carried palm branches and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" They were absolutely convinced that they were witnessing the dawn of the messianic age. Everything the prophets foretold was unfolding before them – and they were part of it. What a feeling of exhilaration!

Then they watched Jesus fly into a rage when he saw the market on the Temple court. Though shocked at his righteous fury, they smiled with satisfaction as he drove out the moneychangers and shady merchants. Serves them right, the scoundrels. Now we're seeing the action. We're really getting somewhere. Jesus is going to drain this spiritual swamp. And it feels so good.

In the days that followed they were on hand to witness the enemies of Jesus try to trip him up with their devilishly clever questions. These were designed to humiliate Jesus or make him look foolish – or better yet, prove him to be a false teacher. At each question, the two disciples remembered how they'd worried, "Uh-oh, how's Jesus going to get out of this one?" And then experiencing the surprise and admiration when Jesus handily provided a simple answer that both solved the problem and made the questioner look like stupid. Hah! Another one bites the dust. This just keeps getting better. There's no hope in matching wits with the one wiser than Solomon.

When on Thursday evening they celebrated the Passover, they felt a strange combination of anticipation and holy awe. They weren't with Jesus that night, of course; only the 12 had that honor. Still, as they retold the well-known story of Israel's deliverance and rehearsed the ancient rituals, this year every act was filled with much more weight and meaning. The overly familiar had suddenly become new again. It was like seeing it for the first time. When they lay down to sleep later that evening, they did so with the expectation that tomorrow they were going to witness something truly extraordinary. Israel, they sensed, was about to be delivered again.

They woke in confusion to the sound of shouting. It was all kind of fuzzy at first, but soon enough they pieced together the story. Shortly after midnight, Jesus was seized and arrested by a cohort of temple guards. He had been taken to the palace of the high priest and arraigned. The illegal kangaroo court had convicted Jesus of blasphemy. And now they were taking him to Pilate, the governor, to have him condemned and crucified under Roman law. They were dumbfounded. This couldn't be happening. It didn't make any sense.

They rushed to portico where Pilate sat in judgment. The scene there was chaos. An angry mob was shouting all kinds of accusations. They were being egged on by the chief priests and leaders. The two arrived just in time to hear the governor order Jesus to be beaten. It was Pilate's failed attempt to satisfy the bloodlust of crowd. They watched in horror as Jesus

was stripped and severely beaten. How could this be happening? How could Jesus allow it to happen?

The beating seemed to go on forever. When it was over, Pilate stood Jesus before the mob and said, "Behold the man!" But they couldn't look. They didn't want to see. They did hope that it would be enough – that the crowd would back off and agree to let Jesus go. But it only got worse. And finally, Pilate gave in. The soldiers dragged Jesus into the Praetorium to begin their cruel abuse.

The two disciples didn't witness what went on in there, but when they next saw Jesus the result of their work was written all over his body. The two wondered how anyone could suffer such brutal violence and still be alive much less be able to carry a cross to Golgotha. It was heart wrenching.

The crucifixion itself was the worst. They watched from a safe distance. They didn't want to get too close. But they did hear the taunts of the priests and leaders calling out, "If you are the Christ, save yourself. Come down from the cross and we'll believe in you." And the two thought, "Yes, Jesus. Do it. Come down from there. Prove to them—as to us—that you are who you claim to be ... that you are who we *hoped*." Whatever hope they had, died when Jesus did.

They were left in bewilderment and despair. And fear – fear for their own lives. They couldn't leave Jerusalem immediately because the Sabbath had fallen. So, they laid low until Sunday, resolving to get out of town at first light. The more distance they could put between themselves and the other disciples the better. It was as they were packing up their few belongings that they heard a second-hand report that the tomb was empty. Some of the women were going so far as to claim an angel told them Jesus was alive. What madness! The poor things; their grief had unhinged their minds. They were having hallucinations. Reluctantly they stayed a few more hours to allow things to settle down, and to see if anything else might develop; but nothing did.

And so, it is that with their heads covered for fear of being recognized and thereby associated with Jesus, they slipped out the city gate. When safely clear, they begin talking about the whole ordeal: what had happened, why it happened, and how things could have gone so very wrong.

They soon become aware of a third presence. Another traveler has come up alongside them as is matching their pace. How long he's been there, they're not sure. After a while, he speaks. "You guys seem to be pretty upset. What are you talking about?" The question stops them dead in their tracks. It brings it all back in a flood, from the highest high of a week ago, to the lowest low they feel now. At length Cleopas gathers himself enough respond, "Are you serious? Where have you been? Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have been going on here in these last days?" Ah, the irony! He's the only one who does know.

But he lets them tell the story. "What things? Tell me." And they do: the whole story, from where it began back in Galilee – all the mighty works and wonders – all the way down to this very morning when they heard the ridiculous report that the one they had so desperately hoped was the Redeemer of Israel had risen from the dead. The traveler listens intently. Oddly, he doesn't react with surprise at even the most shocking parts of the story. None of it seems to bother him either. It's like he knows it all already and doesn't find it upsetting in the least.

It's only at the last, when they finish their account that he registers any surprise; and then not at their story, but at their lack of faith. "How foolish you are, and slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Is it really possible that you've heard and read the Scriptures all these years and have never understood or believed them? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

That must have been one fascinating lesson. The two disciples hung on his every word, remembering later how their hearts had burned to glowing as he opened their minds to understand that this was God's plan all along: to send his Son to save the world from sin by his passion, death, and resurrection. And every passage of Scripture speaks to it: from Abraham having to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, to the Lord redeeming his people from Egypt by the blood of lambs and the death of the firstborn, to the whole Old Testament worship system which was about God forgiving the sins of this people through substitutionary sacrifices of atonement. The common denominator all throughout is the Christ. That's who the whole story is about. That's what Jesus revealed to these two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

And he revealed more than that. By opening their minds to the Scripture and bringing them to faith the way he did, he's giving an illustration of how things are going to be for his disciples from here on out. Like Cleopas and his companion, we don't see Jesus. Our eyes are kept from that. But he does walk alongside us as we journey through this life. And through God's Word he speaks to us. We hear his voice. By the power of his Spirit he opens our minds to understand and to believe in his saving work for us on the cross. And though we did not see him after he rose from the dead, we believe the testimony of the witnesses who did. In all Scripture, we see this was God's plan from the very beginning: to send his Son to redeem us by his passion, death, and resurrection.

And there is yet a third revelation on the road to Emmaus. It happens when they are in the house together sitting down to supper. By this time, through the spoken revelation on the road, the two disciples have come to believe that Jesus is indeed the Christ and that he did in fact rise from the dead. They no longer doubt it. Unseen, they believe. And to those who do believe, Jesus shows himself. Where? In the breaking of the bread. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it for distribution, and for a brief moment the disciples do recognize him. At once his human body vanishes from their sight. They are left to see him in the bread. That's where Jesus wants those who believe in him to see him: in the bread of Holy Communion.

This is highlighted by what happens next. The two disciples hurry back the seven miles to Jerusalem. They're bursting with joy. They want to share their revelation on the road with the other disciples. And unfortunately, today's text ends one verse short of it should have. As soon as the two Emmaus disciples mention the fact that Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread, Jesus suddenly appears in the room for all to see. He's impressing upon them that he wants his visible presence to be tied to the bread – because that too is how it's going to be for his disciples from here on out; until, of course, he comes again in glory. Then every eye will see, and every knee will bow.

Until the dawn of that happy day, may our risen Lord Jesus continue to open our minds to the Scripture, strengthen our faith in him, and reveal himself to us as he did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!