

Slow Hearts, Burning Hearts

Luke 24:13-35

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We have arrived at our last scene in our four-week resurrection tour.

I thought I would begin this last sermon in this series with a bit of a review. Here is what we have seen so far in response to the question, “Where and how does the risen Christ show up in our world and in our lives?”

In week one we looked at the story of doubting Thomas and saw two things:

1. The risen Christ shows up in the midst of human despair, confusion, fear and disbelief and speaks peace.
2. The risen Christ shows up summoning us *beyond* despair, confusion, fear and disbelief, and toward belief.

In week two we were with Jesus and the disciples by the Sea of Galilee:

1. The risen Christ encounters us as we are, amidst the gap between the selves we imagine we are, the selves we present to the world, and the selves that are known truly by God.
2. The risen Christ shows up in everyday life. In the context of daily work; when we’re out fishing.
3. The risen Christ shows up offering a different way. Throw your nets on the other side. Try something new.
4. The risen Christ shows up for breakfast. Jesus’ friends recognize him in the breaking of bread.

In week three we stayed by the Sea of Galilee and joined Jesus and the disciples for breakfast on the beach. We watched as Jesus restored Peter after the shame of his betrayal:

1. The risen Christ shows up as the Divine Artist—the *kingsugi master*—gently working with the broken pieces and setting to work in creating something beautiful and new.
2. The risen Christ shows up with an assignment. *Feed my sheep. Follow me, even unto death.*

So, that's where we've been. The last stage of our journey with the risen Christ is... a journey. We're on the road to Emmaus.

The image on the screen is literally the road to Emmaus. Or, more precisely, a road *in* Emmaus, or Emwas as it was known until a few decades ago. Today, it is a national park outside Jerusalem (about seven miles, as it says in our text today). It's even called "Canada Park," due to the source of much of its funding.

Naomi and I visited this park on a tour to Israel and Palestine with MCC back in 2018. Like many parts of our tour, this place betrays a sad and troubled past.

The town of Emwas was a Palestinian village that was largely destroyed during the Six Days war in 1967. There are only a few ruins that remain in the park today (some were repurposed to make this path).

It was jarring to see these grim reminders of a long and bitter conflict amidst the more pleasant sights of Jerusalem picnickers and cyclists out for a nice day at the park.

At any rate, I thought I would leave this image of present-day Emmaus up for the remainder of the sermon. Despite the troubled history, it is an image that speaks to me of the journey.

So, we've heard the story.

Two of Jesus' disciples are heading away from Jerusalem toward Emmaus. Away from the epicenter, away from the apparent tragedy and failure of Holy Week. Away from a revolution that never got off the ground.

They're rehearsing all of this as they walk. And Jesus shows up alongside them.

They don't recognize him. This has been a consistent theme in our tour thus far. Somehow the resurrected Christ is both familiar and unfamiliar, even when he shows up in bodily form.

And again, Jesus simply asks a question. This is a pattern with the risen Christ.

To Mary: Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?

To the disciples at the sea: Friends, haven't you caught any fish?

To Peter: Do you love me?

And now, to the two disciples on the road: What are you talking about?

The two disciples sadly look at him and ask, incredulously, *Are you the only one in the world who doesn't know what's happened? There was this Jesus, and he was a prophet mighty in word and deed, and our priests and rulers handed him over to be executed.*

And then, one of the saddest lines in all of Scripture: “But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

They go on to talk about the empty tomb that the women found, but it's obvious they still aren't sure what's going on.

And then Jesus begins to tell them what's going on.

This suffering was a necessary part of the plan of God. All of Israel's story and Scriptures thus far had been leading up to this moment. Suffering was not evidence of failure but the means through which God would deliver the hammer blow to sin and death.

Incredibly, at this point they still don't know that it's Jesus. They arrive at Emmaus and urge this stranger to stay with them.

And then, at the table, their eyes are opened. Jesus gives thanks, breaks bread and their eyes are opened. They see Jesus truly even though he had been with him all this time.

And no sooner are their eyes opened and Jesus disappears.

They do a U-turn and head seven miles back from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the disciples that it's all true. He's alive.

There are a few things that we can say about where the risen Christ shows up based on this story. The first few echo themes we've already seen in earlier post-resurrection scenes.

The risen Christ shows up “on the road.” Whether it's specific journeys to specific places or the “journey of life” more broadly, Jesus comes to us where we are.

The risen Christ shows up in the breaking of bread. This was also the case on the beach by the Sea of Galilee in John's gospel

There are also a few new themes that emerge from this encounter.

The risen Christ shows up in Scripture, fulfilling it, interpreting it, transcending it.

From creation to the deliverance of Exodus to Israel to the prophets and everything in between, Jesus reveals himself to the true and living and final Word of God.

And the risen Christ shows up when hope seems lost. Can you hear the heartbreak in verse 21? *But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.* Had hoped. Past tense.

Then and now, Jesus shows up when hope seems lost. Jesus shows up saying, as the British writer Francis Spufford once put it, “Far more can be mended than you know.”

Each of these things we see in the story of the disciples’ journey to Emmaus. But we also see Jesus taking the disciples on a journey of the heart.

The word “heart” shows up twice in this passage. The Greek word is *kardia*. We get English words like “cardiac” and “cardiology” from this.

As is the case with the English word “heart,” there is a wide range of meanings for *kardia*. According to my brief tour through a concordance this week, it can be:

- an organ in the body which is the centre of the circulation of the blood, and hence was regarded as the seat of physical life
- the centre of all physical and spiritual life
- the soul or mind
- the fountain and seat of our thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavours
- the understanding, the faculty and seat of the intelligence
- the middle or central or inmost part of anything

The word “heart” does a lot of work for us. It can refer to everything from biological function to emotional longing to some of the deepest philosophical and theological realities of being human.

I have to confess, though, that I haven’t always loved the word “heart,” at least not how it was sometimes used in churchy circles.

I grew up hearing a lot about “inviting Jesus into your heart” as your personal Saviour.

If you did this, you were saved. It was very important to invite Jesus into your heart and to know when this happened because this was when you were saved. This despite the fact that there is not a single instance in all of scripture where we are told to “invite Jesus into our hearts.”

All this “heart” language sounded fuzzy and imprecise and subjective to me. How would I know when Jesus was in my heart? Would I feel him rattling around behind my ribcage?

But the idea persists. I heard it language again this week. On two different occasions, in conversations with two strangers this week (both times, I should say, in the context of a great deal of anxiety about hell and judgment), people were quick, even *desperate* to assure me that they had “asked Jesus into their heart.”

And yet, despite the ways in which we have misused the word, the heart matters. It is even—pardon the pun!—the heart of the matter.

In verse 25, in response to the disciples’ telling of recent events, Jesus says, “Oh, how foolish you are and *how slow of heart...*”

Jesus is not saying, “how slow you have been to apprehend a collection of facts about God and God’s plan.”

The word “heart” is important here. It speaks to the truth that faith is a holistic exercise. Not just our minds, but all of who we are is involved.

The word “heart” here points to our connection to the things that matter, our deepest hopes and fears and joys and sorrows.

Jesus is saying to his disciples, your passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavours—these have all been too slow to embrace and align with what God is doing in the world.

Indeed, they didn’t even recognize Jesus when he was standing right in front of them.

We, too, have slow hearts. We so often fail to see Jesus when he’s right there with us. We’re too distracted, too quick to default to the disenchanted universe of secularism where God is thought to be absent or uninvolved, too busy.

This morning I did something unusual. I just went and sat outside on the front porch and ate my breakfast. I didn’t have my phone. I didn’t have a book. I didn’t have my laptop. I just sat there. It was super weird. At least, at first.

And then gradually I felt a kind of peace descend upon me. I listened to the birds. I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. I noticed the colours of the flowers and the grass. I thought of the many gifts that God has given in my life. Specific people came to mind—people God has used to guide and shape me. I prayed.

As I sat there, it was like the world was humming with grace. I think it often is, and not just on beautiful spring mornings. But I just don't pay attention or notice as often as I should. My heart is too often slow, thick, sluggish, imperceptive.

Sometimes Jesus is walking right beside us, and we are too slow hearted to even notice.

The second time the word *kardia* (heart) shows up is near the end of the story. After Jesus links the scriptures to the events of Holy Week, after he breaks bread with them and their eyes are opened, what do they say?

They don't say, "Boy, didn't that Jesus make a lot of sense?"

They don't say, "Man, Jesus sure filled in a lot of the blanks for me with his bible lesson!"

They don't say, "That was some theology lecture!"

They don't even say, "Wow, that Jesus really blew my mind!"

No, what they say is: *Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*

Did we not have this strange stirring within us while this man who we did not recognize walked and talked with us? Did we not somehow feel more alive more attuned to the ways of God in the world and in our lives? Did not this man meet us in our shattered hope and infuse joy and purpose and meaning?

Jesus had led them on a journey from slow hearts to burning hearts.

I don't know how your heart feels today, on this sixth Sunday of Easter, 2022. I don't know where you would locate yourself on a continuum between "slow" and "burning."

But here's what I do know. I do know that human beings do not change unless their hearts are involved.

The disciples were not transformed through their own efforts to understand and modify their behaviour accordingly. They were changed by the grace of God as it intersected with—even *collided* with—their assumptions, their disappointments, their failures, their dreams and hopes for the future.

I listened to a podcast this week about theories of change. How do people change? In ministry, in the workplace, in personal relationships, parenting, marriage, friendship? How do we get people to change (including the people who inhabit our own skin!)?

We very often assume that it's mostly about things like having the right information, making a good case, dispensing the proper advice. If people have good data, they'll change.

Even if we wouldn't describe it this way, our behaviour betrays that this is how we *actually* imagine it all works.

And yet, have you ever tried to change someone's mind through rational argument? About a political argument? About some divisive social issue? About something in their life that you think is hurting them? About a behaviour you'd like to alter? How did it go?

Have you ever tried to change something in your *own* life through a sheer act of the will? How did it go?

I'm guessing the answer to all of the above would be, "Not particularly well." This is certainly the case in my own experience.

This is because as human beings we are not driven primarily by knowledge and will, but by desire. We are creatures of desire. We are creatures of love.

A few summers ago, we did a sermon series on the seven deadly sins. In it, I used a quote from an interview about the life and theology of Thomas Cranmer, author of the Book of Common Prayer and de facto founder of the Anglican Church:

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

We only change when our hearts change. We even use this expression, right? *I had a change of heart.*

We change when our desires are changed, when we *want* to change ourselves. In the best-case scenario, we change when one love is replaced by another higher, better, love.

Jesus knows this. He knew it on that road to Emmaus two thousand years ago and he knows it now.

He knows that slow hearts do not require a bit of tweaking with more accurate data. They need to be set ablaze by the love of God.

And this, ultimately, is what I hope that we can take away from this four-week resurrection tour. That we come away not only with some new knowledge that we didn't have before about Jesus' behaviour and encounters with people after Easter, important as these might be.

But that our hearts will have been stirred by the God who meets his people in the aftermath of failure and betrayal and confusion, and who speaks peace, hope, and love to wounded and broken hearts.

Who pronounces forgiveness, not judgment. Who promises life and not death.

May God turn our hearts toward higher loves.

Amen.

