

Emmaus

Scripture Text: Luke 24:13-35

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore themes of conversion, spiritual growth, and ministry through the lens of The Road to Emmaus.

Digging In

“The Walk to Emmaus” is a story specific to Luke’s gospel that is heralded by commentators as a “literary and spiritual jewel”ⁱⁱ due to its clever telling of the story and the spiritual insights it conveys. As the passage opens, we meet two disciples who are traveling to Emmaus on the same day that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women discover the empty tomb (24:1-12). This, then, is Easter day, though these disciples do not yet have any inkling of the significance of this day. In fact, they are walking confused and dejected away from the crucifixion, which they believe has ended the career of Jesus. David Garland argues, “Their departure from Jerusalem at the first opportunity, when the Sabbath is over, hints that the community of disciples is in danger of collapsing because of bitter disappointment, grief, and confusion.”ⁱⁱⁱ As they walk this despairing road, these disciples are recounting among themselves the horrific and disappointing events of the past days.

With the scene thus set (though the disciples’ confusion and disappointment will not become apparent until later in the passage), Jesus himself now enters the scene, though the disciples do not recognize him. What ensues proves to be a wonderfully ironic conversation that unfolds with the readers knowing Jesus’ true identity but the characters in the passage working without this information. Thus, when Jesus asks, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” (24:17) one of the disciples, now named Cleopas, replies with incredulity, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” (24:18). As Darrell Bock notes, “Of course, Jesus knows exactly what has happened, since it happened to him!”^{iv} The irony here is thick!

Where is Emmaus?

Because Luke is the only ancient author who is known to have mentioned Emmaus, we cannot with any certainty name the location of this village. What we do know is derived from the text itself: 24:13 describes Emmaus simply as a village about seven miles (KJV, “threescore furlongs”) from Jerusalem.ⁱ

As the story progresses, Jesus chooses not to reveal himself and instead prompts the disciples to name the events of which they speak. In response, they tell of Jesus of Nazareth, “a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God,” who was handed over by the religious authorities and was crucified. It is here that a great note of sadness is tolled, for “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (24:21). More than this, sadness and disappointment has been mixed with confusion and conjecture, for women from among the disciples had reported just that morning that they had found an empty tomb and experienced an angelic vision saying that Jesus was alive. Upon investigation by others in the community of disciples, it was confirmed that the tomb was indeed empty, but no one had actually seen Jesus. In all of this, we see that these disciples have been paying attention. They had faith in Jesus, who they thought would redeem Israel, but now grieve his death. Yet even as they grieve, they are vexed by news of the empty tomb.

In response to all of this, Jesus offers a rebuke: “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (24:25). While this response may seem harsh, it celebrates the important theme in Luke’s writings that what happened to Jesus was neither fluke nor accident but was instead divinely ordained by God and foretold in the scriptures. For Luke, “Those who do not see this fulfillment are ‘foolish’ and ‘slow of heart to believe.’”^v More than this, Jesus’ strong words here should be seen as the preamble to the gracious moment of teaching that follows, for Jesus goes on to “explain to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself” (24:27). Rather than a harsh rebuke, these words of Jesus should be seen as a provocative invitation to move to a place of better understanding which he then illuminates by his teaching.

Presumably after Jesus finishes his exposition of the scriptures, he and his companions come to the village of Emmaus, and it looks like Jesus will continue on the road. The disciples, however, urge him to stay the night by saying, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over” (24:29). While this invitation may have been issued because the disciples wished to hear more of Jesus’ teaching,^{vi} the text does not explicitly say that this is the case. Instead, the invitation is geared more towards Jesus’ welfare; he should stay with them

The Redemption of Israel

As the disciples speak of Jesus, they say that they “had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (24:21). In saying this, the disciples reveal a high, if misinformed, view of Jesus’ identity. Like other members of their people (including the inner circle of twelve disciples), these disciples were expecting Jesus to redeem Israel by conquering her enemies and restoring Israel to her former place of glory. With this hope in mind, Jesus’ crucifixion seems to have ended his career. What these disciples must realize now is that far from ending his career, Jesus’ death was a necessary part in bringing redemption.

because it is getting late (and not because they desire to hear more). In either case, it seems that “he would have left them had they not prevailed on him to stay and accept their hospitality.”^{vii} Importantly, it is this insistence on hospitality (they “urged him strongly) that makes the difference in the story.

Having sat down to dinner with the disciples, the hospitality theme is turned on its head as Jesus himself acts as the host by offering a prayer of thanksgiving, breaking the bread, and passing it out.^{viii} And it is as Jesus does all of this that the disciples come to recognize him. Whereas before they were “kept from recognizing him” (24:16), their eyes are now opened (24:31). Both of these instances stand as examples of the divine passive, meaning that God has caused both the failure to recognize and the eventual recognition. Theologically, this points to the idea that “God is the revealer of the risen Christ.”^{ix}

After the disciples recognize Jesus for who he is, Jesus disappears from their presence, and they are left mulling over this revelation. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scripture to us?” they say (24:32). Then, knowing that Jesus is alive from the testimony of the women, from Jesus’ exposition of the scriptures, and ultimately from their own experience of him, the disciples leave immediately for Jerusalem (even though it is late) to share this wondrous news with the other disciples of Jesus.

Application

A Winding Path to Belief

While this passage is rich with applicable content, perhaps a good place to start in seeking application is in noticing the winding path that these disciples take toward comprehending the resurrection. As the story unfolds, we find that the disciples are given multiple opportunities to make the leap to affirming that Jesus is risen before they manage to do so. First, it is clear that they have heard the testimony of the women, who not only discovered an empty tomb that very morning but also saw “a vision of angels, who said he was alive” (24:23). Second, they are confronted with the testimony of scripture as Jesus “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets ... explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (24:27). Third, they experienced a moment of recognition at their meal with Jesus (24:31). Importantly, it is only after the third experience takes place that the first two experiences come properly into focus. Once they have recognized Jesus in the flesh, the disciples affirm his teaching (24:32) and can affirm the testimony of their fellow disciples.

In all of this, we see that the path to belief is not always a quick process. While some disciples, like the apostle Paul, will certainly affirm dramatic and quick conversion experiences, others will speak of a more gradual process in which a number of experiences eventually coalesce to bring them to faith in Christ. The important thing is

not so much the speed of conversion so much as it is the person of conversion. While Paul and the disciples on the road to Emmaus would speak of different kinds of experiences, they would also affirm encountering the same risen Lord. For Paul, this was in a dramatic moment of challenge on the road to Damascus. For Cleopas and his friend, it was in the less dramatic teaching of a stranger and a moment of recognition at a meal. While the particulars of these experiences are different, it is the same Lord who draws in both stories. Now, in the age of the Spirit, we would say that it is the same Spirit who draws people to Jesus.

With all of this in mind, it is important that we reject the temptation to dictate the processes by which others come to faith in Jesus. While we may think that experiences like hearing the testimony of others and being shown the scriptures should lead a person quickly to faith, the Spirit may be working differently. In my own life, I remember just such a situation. A friend was obviously taking steps toward faith in Christ, but he was moving so slowly! He had heard the testimony of others and had begun attending church. He even had a dream about needing to get right with God. With all of this in his court, I thought that the next step to conversion was obvious, but it was not yet obvious to him. There came a moment, though, when all of this came to a head in his life, and he did indeed profess faith in Christ. My job in all of this was simply to make myself available to both the Spirit and my friend in this process. Any impatience on my part would not only have failed to hurry the process but might also have quenched the movement of the Spirit as I became pushy. Fortunately, though I was a bit impatient to see my friend take the step of faith, I kept this to myself and was able to rejoice with him when he took that step in his own time. As we consider the process of conversion, we should affirm that it is a mysterious process that has no formula. This in mind, it is left to us to pray and follow the lead of the Spirit as the Spirit draws people to faith in Christ.

Incomplete Revelation

Beyond discussing how the Spirit draws unbelievers to faith as we look at the Emmaus walk, we can also look at how the same Spirit draws believers to new places in their own faith walks. After all, the men in the story are called disciples despite their lack of understanding in regard to the resurrection. In this, they have followed Jesus but do not yet understand how to process or understand his death. We might say, then, that their understanding of Jesus is incomplete.

While we would say that belief in the resurrection is now necessary for discipleship, we can nevertheless affirm that we come to the faith without a full understanding of all that it entails. And it is only as we walk the road of faith that the Spirit adds to our understanding. Thus, our own faith journeys are much like the disciples' journey to Emmaus. On the way, we encounter the risen Lord in the scriptures as the Spirit illumines our minds, in service as we care for others (the Emmaus disciples did this by offering Jesus hospitality), and in the seemingly mundane (like at a meal). The

point in all of this is not that we have continual recognition moments but is instead to note that Jesus meets us as we travel the road. Here we can hear the Apostle Paul saying to the Philippian congregation, “All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Phil 3:15-16). In this passage, Paul calls Christians to keep walking the journey of faith confident that God will continue to add to our faith as we go.

The Centrality of the Scriptures

In this passage, it is clear that the scriptures are central in the life of the believer. Jesus does not simply tell them how things had to happen in Jerusalem. Instead, he shows them that all of this was already present in the scriptures. Like the Emmaus disciples, we should become students of the scriptures, for it is in the scriptures that we discover the story of God, learn about our place in the story, and come to meet the God who is telling the story. Also like the Emmaus disciples, we can expect that our understanding of the scriptures will need to be challenged from time to time so that we can understand them more fully. In this, we should always approach the scriptures with humble and teachable spirits.

Guest or Host

One of the many interesting points in this passage is that the same Jesus who accepts hospitality as a guest then acts as the host of the meal. In this we can perhaps see with many commentators parallels with Revelation 3:20, in which Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” As noted above, Jesus does not force his way to the disciples’ table. Indeed, he would have kept walking had they not offered hospitality. A movement is therefore necessary in our lives that continually opens the door to Jesus.

Once the door is open, though, we experience a wonderful reversal, for the one who has entered as guest begins to act as host. It is Jesus who offers thanks and breaks the bread as we sit down to eat with him. In this we can see that Jesus is ready care for us if we will only let him in. Astoundingly, the same hands that broke bread for the five thousand and then broke bread for the twelve at the last supper breaks bread for us as well. In this, we become the people of his care.

Paying It Forward

Another point of application comes in comparing the Emmaus account with the story of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. Note the parallels below:

The disciples are traveling from Jerusalem.	An Ethiopian Eunuch is traveling from Jerusalem.
The disciples are pondering the events of the past days.	The Ethiopian Eunuch is pondering the scriptures.
A stranger (Jesus) joins the disciples.	A stranger (Philip) joins the Ethiopian Eunuch.
The stranger explains the scriptures to the disciples.	The stranger explains the scriptures to the Ethiopian Eunuch.
Jesus disappears suddenly.	Philip disappears suddenly.

In these parallels, we see that Philip is acting for the Ethiopian as Jesus acted for the disciples traveling to Emmaus. Jesus' followers, therefore, are not only recipients of his ministry of illumination but are instruments of that ministry as well. If we will offer ourselves to the Spirit, we too can be used to bring someone closer to Christ.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "Name one thing that drives you crazy." Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.^x

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Luke that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Saturday's reading and invite them to open their Bibles to Luke 24.

Setting the Stage

- **Question:** Put yourself in the disciples' shoes in the days after the crucifixion. What are you feeling? What is going through your mind?
- **Question:** Now let's say that you have heard that Mary Magdalene and others are reporting that they found the tomb empty and met angels who said that Jesus was alive. What's going through your mind now?
- **Explain:** Explain that the main characters in our passage today are feeling much the same.

Telling the Story

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 24:13-16.
 - **Question:** Why do you think these disciples failed to recognize Jesus?
- **Scripture Reading:** Luke 24:17-24
 - **Question:** Is Jesus aware of what happened in Jerusalem?
 - **Question:** Why do you think he starts this conversation?
 - **Question:** What do we learn about the men as they tell the story of the past few days?
- **Scripture Reading:** Luke 24:25-27
 - **Question:** How do you imagine Jesus saying these words? Why do you think he takes this tone?
 - **Question:** What does Jesus go on to teach the men in this passage?
 - **Question:** Are the scriptures still important to us today? Why?
 - Draw from “The Centrality of Scripture” section above for more on this.
- **Scripture Reading:** Luke 24:28-32
 - **A Winding Path to Belief**
 - **Question:** When do the disciples finally realize that they are with Jesus?
 - **Question:** Why do you think that it took them so long?
 - **Question:** Can anyone here tell a story of it taking a while for them to come to faith in Jesus?
 - **Explain:** Drawing on the “A Winding Path to Belief” section above explain why it is important that we not try to control people’s paths to conversion.
 - **Question:** If we can’t control another person’s path to belief, then what is our role in the process?
 - **Incomplete Revelation**
 - **Explain:** Explain that while the disciples can help us look at the path to conversion, they can also shed light on our own faith journeys.
 - **Question:** How many of you feel like you have learned all that you will ever learn in your faith?
 - **Question:** Since we are not yet fully formed, how do we grow in our faith?
 - **Question:** How did the disciples on the road to Emmaus grow in their faith?
- **Scripture Reading:** Luke 24:33-35
 - **Paying It Forward**
 - **Question:** What is the first thing that the disciples do once they realize that it is Jesus?

- **Question:** Can anyone think of another scripture story that is similar to this one?
- **Explain:** Drawing on this section above, show the similarities between this passage and the one about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Explain that we not only receive the ministry of Jesus but join him in ministry to others.

Closing Question: Is there anything in this lesson that you think is especially important for us to take home?

ⁱ Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Zondervan, 2007), 345, 349.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 343. Other commentators share this sentiment.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Luke*, vol. 3, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan,, 2011), 950.

^{iv} Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 613.

^v R. Allen Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 478.

^{vi} Garland, *Luke*, 3:954.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid., 3:955; Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 348.

^{ix} Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 348.

^x Question taken from: "Funny Icebreaker Questions," *Buzzle*, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/funny-icebreaker-questions.html>.