Introduction

Our text yesterday was about the discovery of Scripture and the transformation it inspired. Today’s text is also about discovery and transformation. This time it’s not about physically unearthing a body of writings, but about discovering the risen body of Jesus. In our story yesterday Josiah instinctively knew the significance of what he read in Scripture and was shaken to the core, even as he sought further understanding from an authoritative interpreter. In our story today, the disciples also require an interpreter to help them understand what’s going on and they also go back to Scripture. Like Josiah, they are gripped by the power of God’s Word and it radically changes their lives.

It takes the disciples a while, though, to put all the pieces together. It reminds me of the process of putting a puzzle together, something my family does almost every year when we get together at Christmas. Each piece has its own distinctive shape and slightly different colour, but even so, I can tell they’re all from the same puzzle. Yet, at first, I have absolutely no idea how the pieces fit together. It almost always helps to look at the picture on the box cover. Seeing that larger context helps me figure out how the individual pieces come together to make the picture. That’s what happens to the disciples in Luke 24. They have the individual puzzle pieces in place, but they are absolutely clueless about how they all fit together to create a meaningful story. They need help putting the puzzle together. We’re going to look together at how that happens in Luke 24 and then reflect on how this story can help us make meaning when confronted with our own puzzles.

Historical and Literary Context

Yesterday when we studied 2 Kings, we spent some time exploring the historical context of the text. Today I want to pay particular attention to the literary context and to how Luke tells the story.

The tale of the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus is the second of three post-resurrection scenes in the Gospel of Luke, and all three episodes take place on the same day.

1 In the first scene the women who have travelled with Jesus from Galilee go to the tomb with spices, ready to anoint the dead body of their Lord. They find the tomb empty and two men in
dazzling clothes announcing the good news that Jesus has risen. The women respond with joy and rush back to tell the rest of the disciples – who, unfortunately, don’t believe a word they say.

(2)  In the next scene two disciples meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. We’ll come back to this one.

(3)  In the last scene Jesus again appears to his gathered disciples but they are terrified, thinking he is a ghost. Only after Jesus shows them that he is “flesh and bone” and interprets the Scriptures for them can they fully see and believe.

The Gospel ends with the disciples filled with joy and worshipping Jesus. Notice that in neither of the two scenes that frame the Emmaus road story does the empty tomb or the risen body of Jesus in and of itself convince the disciples that Jesus is alive. All three episodes involve a movement from blindness to sight, from despair to joy. In all three the process requires interpretation of the events and revelation. Luke 24:13-35 is the centrepiece of these three scenes, and its immediate context helps us be alert what to look for.

Also important for understanding our text is the larger context of the whole Gospel, and we’ll come back to this numerous times in our study. Luke 24 is the climax of the Gospel. It is where we come to see fully who Jesus is, the crucified and risen Messiah in whose name repentance and forgiveness of sin will be proclaimed to all people. It is also where the story of the disciples comes to resolution. In fact, the message of the Emmaus road story is not just that Jesus is alive, important as that is, but what happens to the disciples. In short, Luke 24 is about the resurrection of Jesus, and it is about discipleship.

So we need to know a bit about the disciples in Luke’s story. The disciples don’t come across quite as dim-witted as the disciples in Mark, but for the most part, they really don’t get who Jesus is. On the positive side, Jesus calls them to follow and they leave everything. Jesus gives them authority to preach and heal and they participate in his ministry. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah of God. But overall they never really get it. They don’t understand that Jesus is a Messiah who will suffer and die, and are clueless whenever Jesus tries to tell them about his impending death and resurrection. They squabble about who is the greatest and vie for seats of power at Jesus’ left and right hand, demonstrating that they haven’t caught on to his teachings about servanthood. They are often afraid, and at the end of Jesus’ life, they betray him, desert him, deny him. By the end of the Gospel, however, and in the book of Acts, the disciples have become joyful witnesses, who boldly confess Jesus before governors and kings, and who are ready to suffer for his name. The Gospel of Luke, and especially chapter 24, is about this transformation of the disciples. So let’s turn now to Luke 24:13-35.
Structure of the text

Our text divides roughly into two halves, vv. 13-27 and vv. 28-35. This division is signalled by the words “going to a village” in vv. 13 and 28. In these two parts there is a movement away from Jerusalem and a movement toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem, in Luke’s Gospel, is a place of theological and structural significance. Jerusalem is the geographical centre of the Jewish faith, the place where the temple stands and the place of God’s presence. Luke’s Gospel begins in Jerusalem with Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, waiting and longing for God’s redemption. The whole second half of the Gospel consists of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. And the Gospel ends with the disciples in Jerusalem, joyfully worshipping God and awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. In short, Jerusalem is the heart of Israel’s longing for salvation and the place where God’s salvation in Jesus is fully revealed.

Our text is a microcosm of the Gospel, for it also begins and ends in Jerusalem (vv. 13, 33) and also depicts a movement of the disciples from limited vision to joyful understanding. This story of transformation, moving out from Jerusalem and back, is captured in the story by two parallel verses, one in each half. Notice that in v. 16 the text says, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” and then in the second half, in v. 31, it says, “then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” The vocabulary in the second half echoes the words in the first half, as if Luke is intentionally signaling to us readers, “pay attention, this is what the story is about – it is about blind disciples coming to see Jesus.”

Studying the text

Let’s move now to unpacking Luke’s marvellous tale of transformation and discipleship. Like any good story, our text begins by setting the stage. In v. 13 we learn the following:

- “Who” – The story is about two disciples who heard the women’s story and were probably with Jesus in his ministry. The fact that they are just two generic disciples at this point makes it easier for us to identify with them. We too are disciples of Jesus. Later we learn that one of them is called Cleopas, and some speculate that his companion was his wife.
- “When” – The story takes place that very day when the empty tomb was discovered.
- “What” is happening – The two are going on a journey.
- “Where” – They are on a road between Jerusalem and Emmaus, a nearby village

Notice that there’s a lot of “travel” language throughout this text: they were “going” to a village (v. 13); Jesus “went” with them (v. 15) and asks what they are talking about while they are “walking” (v. 17). Later, as they near the village to which they’re “going,” Jesus is about to keep “going” (v. 28). At the
end of the story the two disciples twice use the phrase “on the way” (vv. 32, 34). Is this significant? I think it is. It relates to what I said earlier about this story being a snapshot of what happens in the larger story of discipleship. In the Gospel of Luke the “journey” is an important theme. From 9:51 until 19:44, when he enters the temple, Jesus is journeying toward Jerusalem. This is a distinctive feature of the Gospel of Luke – this long travel narrative, as it is often called – and Luke frequently reminds his readers that Jesus is “on the way.” Jesus’ disciples accompany him on this journey, and while they are on the way, Jesus reveals himself to them and teaches them about what it means to be his followers. The journey becomes a metaphor for discipleship in the Gospel; that is, being a disciple of Jesus means to be “on the way” with Jesus. It means conforming one’s own life to such a Messiah who will suffer and die and on the third day rise. It means coming to understand him as a Messiah who will suffer and die and on the third day rise. The early church is called “the Way” (9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22). In Luke 24, two disciples meet Jesus while they are travelling and on the way Jesus reveals himself to them and teaches them. In a nutshell, that’s what discipleship is about.

As the two disciples are walking, they are also talking with each other. Verses 14-17 also contain a lot of “talking” words, and when I read this part of the text, the image of a tennis ball being lobbed back and forth came to mind. So much has happened in the last few days, and there is SO much they don’t understand. And so they talk to each other, throwing words back and forth, trying to make sense of it all. Suddenly a stranger comes along and asks them about the words they are tossing around. The conversation ball drops to the ground, and the two disciples stand still, looking dejected. How can it be that this stranger knows nothing of the tragic events that just unfolded in Jerusalem?!

It seems very strange to us that Jesus’ close followers don’t recognize him – why don’t they? – but it’s a question that the text unfortunately doesn’t try to answer. Clearly, Jesus’ resurrection body is a new and different kind of body, not just the resuscitation of a corpse. But it is a body – a body that walks with them and later eats with them, not a ghost without hands or feet! They are in no way expecting to see a risen Jesus and so they don’t see him. It’s not that hard to understand, really. I was at an event recently with thousands of people, and I knew my daughter was going to meet me there. But we hadn’t agreed on a specific place to connect and she was wearing sunglasses. I must have looked at her for a full minute without recognizing her. Until she said, “Hi Mom,” I assumed she was a stranger smiling at me. It was weird – one minute she was a stranger and then the molecules shifted and she was my daughter. So also Jesus’ disciples do not recognize him when they meet him on the road. But there’s more at stake here
than lack of recognition. As New Testament scholar Robert Tannehill notes, the disciples’ “failure to recognize Jesus is part of a larger spiritual blindness which must be cured.”

In the Gospel of Luke, words referring to sight, vision, light have a metaphorical significance. Listen to just a few verses from earlier in the Gospel: [See also 1:78-79; 3:5; 6:41; 8:16; 11:34; 19:41-42.]

- Lk. 2:30-32: “For my eyes have seen your salvation, you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”
- Lk. 10:23: “Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’”

Seeing and light in Luke’s Gospel refer not only to sensory perception but also to understanding, faith, salvation. When people truly see Jesus, when the light dawns, then belief and salvation are present. When Cleopas and his friend don’t at first see Jesus, and eventually do recognize him, Luke is also saying something about discipleship and faith. The question we want to explore is how do they come to “see”, how are their eyes opened.

Before we get to that, though, let’s look at their conversation with Jesus before they recognize him. The scene drips with irony and even humour. They scold Jesus for his ignorance when they themselves don’t have a clue what’s going on. They explain to Jesus all the things that have happened to him! They tell Jesus “him they did not see,” even as they cannot see Jesus right in front of them! The use of such irony helps us empathize with the disciples and draws us into the story. When will the light dawn? It may even make us wonder what we might be missing because of our own blindness.

The disciples’ explanation to Jesus in vv. 19-24 focuses on 3 key things: (1) Jesus’ identity and fate (2) the significance of his death, and (3) the rumours of his resurrection. Since we’re in the know, we can judge whether their perspective is true. Is their account consistent with how Luke wants to portray Jesus? Well, partly they’re right. But they’re also missing some crucial things.

(1) First of all, they identify Jesus of Nazareth as “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.” That’s accurate, isn’t it? There are a few places in the Gospel where Jesus refers to himself as a prophet. For example, in Lk. 4:24 Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown;” and in 13:33: “Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is

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impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” In some respects, then, Cleopas is right about Jesus. But is this description of Jesus adequate? No, not really. If we’ve paid attention to what Luke has been saying throughout the Gospel, we know that Jesus is far more than a prophet. He is the Messiah and royal Son of God; he is Saviour and Lord. He does things and says things that go far beyond what any of the prophets said and did. Cleopas’ identification is only partially right and he doesn’t clearly see Jesus yet.

Notice also how Cleopas describes the events of the last few days: “our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and they crucified him.” That also is accurate. In fact, the angels at the tomb used exactly the same words when they reminded the women what Jesus had said – “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise” (24:7). But notice what Cleopas leaves out – “and on the third day rise.” He has part of the story right, but is missing the crucial last piece.

(2) This is reinforced by what he says next: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” These words pick up language that Luke used in the birth stories to express the hope of salvation Jesus would bring. Zechariah blesses the God of Israel “for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.” (1:68). The prophet Anna speaks about Jesus to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (2:38). Remember that the Jews of Jesus’ day were not free. They were living under the thumb of the powerful Roman empire. Although basically free to practice their religion, they were heavily taxed, watched closely, and constantly reminded that the land was not their own. Many of their own religious leaders were corrupt, in bed with Roman power. The Jews of Jesus’ day longed for the future day of the Lord when they would again be free, when God not Caesar would reign, when all could sit under their own fig tree and not be afraid. Jesus’ talk about the reign of God being at hand, his authoritative teaching, and his powerful deeds of healing raised hopes that perhaps God’s redemption was near. Could this be the Messiah promised by the prophets? Was Yahweh coming down to reign at last? Hopes were indeed high. Everyone is watching as Jesus rides into Jerusalem. So . . . when the disciples stand still looking dejected, it’s not only because they have lost their dearest friend; rather, their hopes for the liberation of their entire nation have come crashing down around them and are dead in the grave with Jesus.

Moreover, all this took place three days ago, they say. Three days ago. The Jews believed that the soul hovered around a dead body for three days and then departed for good. In other words, Jesus is
really dead. The disciples have no memory of what we as readers know, that Jesus promised he would rise again after three days (9:22; 13:32; 18:33; 24:7). The disciples have the raw materials but are not able to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

(3) The last part of Cleopas’ speech picks up on the reports of the empty tomb. Once again, the disciples have some things right – they accurately repeat what Luke told us at the beginning of chapter 24, about the women who went to the tomb early in the morning only to find it empty. They accurately report the angels’ message that Jesus is alive (v. 23). What they don’t say explicitly is that the disciples didn’t believe the women’s “idle tale”. Although their own investigation confirmed the women’s report, “him they did not see.” That, in a nutshell, is their problem – they don’t see Jesus. Remember how we talked about the significance of the “vision” language in the Gospel. The disciples not only don’t physically see Jesus but, even more important, they don’t perceive what is true about the empty tomb.

Now it’s Jesus’ turn. [see vv. 25-27] Jesus calls the disciples “foolish” and “slow of heart to believe.” They lack understanding, but it’s not only a matter of head knowledge. This concerns the heart, that is, one’s faith, commitments, and character. What they need is transformation not more information. In the parable of the soils, Jesus taught them that the good soil represents those “who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (8:15). The disciples’ hearts are not evil but they are slow to believe, and therefore slow to produce good fruit.

Verse 26 asks the nagging question the disciples need to answer in order to see clearly: “Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer and enter into his glory through suffering?” The word “necessary” is used often in Luke’s Gospel and implies “divine necessity,” that is, necessary in God’s purposes. The answer to Jesus’ rhetorical question is far from clear to the disciples. Jesus reaches out to their foggy minds and sluggish hearts by returning to Scripture. He illuminates how all the “things about himself” were in accordance with Scripture. Notice that Jesus doesn’t scold them for not remembering his passion predictions. He rather chides them for failing to believe on the basis of all the prophecets declared. Remember when Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)? The punch line of that parable is “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Now someone has risen from the dead. Are they convinced? No. First they must listen to Moses and the prophets, and then maybe they will get it.

This is probably the most theologically difficult part of our text. Luke doesn’t say which Scripture texts Jesus exegetes or why exactly the Messiah must suffer or how the Old Testament helps to interpret
Jesus’ death. We only hear that they do. If we’ve grown up with the Christian faith, we take it for granted that Jesus’ death fulfills Scripture and was necessary for our salvation. Our understandings are shaped by 2000 years of reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ death, beginning already with the apostle Paul. We may debate various theories of the atonement but that Jesus’ death and resurrection fit into the purposes of God is a given. For Jesus’ earliest followers, however, it was not self-evident that it had to happen this way nor did it make any sense. God’s Messiah was supposed to save them from death, not die himself. God’s Messiah was supposed to be righteous and powerful, not hang on a cross in weakness. God would raise all the righteous dead on the last day when God fully established God’s reign, not raise one person when the rest of creation was still groaning. The recent events were totally inexplicable to the disciples.

The only way for them to begin to put the pieces together was for Jesus to show them the larger picture – like looking at the picture on the cover of the jigsaw puzzle box. Here’s the key question: In what way does the Old Testament point to the necessity of Jesus’ suffering and death? Although Luke 24 doesn’t explicitly tell us, I want to suggest three things that might help us understand this. (No doubt much more could be said!)

First, the early church looked back into its Scriptures and found texts that in hindsight seemed to point to Jesus. The Psalms and Isaiah are especially popular in early Christian thinking about Jesus’ fulfillment of Scripture. For example, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” is from Psa. 118:22 and is applied to Jesus. In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, Philip sees in the suffering servant song of Isaiah 53 the “good news about Jesus.”

Second, the sweeping way in which Luke refers to “all the prophets” or “all the scripture” suggests that the fulfillment of Scripture refers to more than specific texts. Rather, the whole story of Israel and of God working for the salvation of God’s people reaches its climax in Jesus Christ. He brings to completion all that God has promised and desired for God’s people.

Third, the fact that Jesus does this not through power and might but through suffering is consistent with the Scriptures’ testimony about how God works in the world. No, the Old Testament doesn’t woodenly predict that the Messiah must suffer. But there is a pattern of prophetic suffering. Throughout the history of salvation, God’s agents have encountered rejection, hostility, even death when confronting the sinful powers of the world. Think of Moses who was rejected by his own people. Think of Elijah who begged God to take his life as he fled from Jezebel’s wrath (1 Kings 19). Think of Jeremiah who cursed the day he was born because he was compelled to speak God’s word to a rebellious people. Jesus himself recognized that suffering was the destiny of the prophets before him (Lk. 11:47-51; 13:33-34;
20:9-18) and that it would be his own fate as well. That’s what happens when the goodness and truth of God collide with a sinful world – God’s messengers get killed. It was like that throughout Scripture and it was like that even with God’s own Son.

But this pattern of suffering is not the end of the story; rather, God’s persistent will to redeem sinful humanity is the final word. And so God who gives life and breath raises Jesus from the dead. God upsets sinful human plans so that God’s purposes to save and give life are accomplished. God is a God of reversal and works through the unexpected, even through weakness, to redeem God’s creation. This pattern is present in the Hebrew Scriptures also. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, who left his family, and Sarah, who was barren. He used Moses, who five times refused God’s call, to help a band of slaves escape from mighty Pharaoh’s rule. God called insignificant Israel to be a light to the nations. Israel’s greatest king was originally a young shepherd boy. The list could go on.

How was it possible that Jesus of Nazareth could be the Messiah, when he had been rejected and crucified? The stranger on the Emmaus road points the disciples back to Scripture and interprets for them how Jesus is really the culmination of everything God has done. As Robert Tannehill says, the events of the last days follow a sacred pattern; they “are not meaningless and chaotic, for they reflect the rhythm of God’s work in the word.” What Jesus does, then, is bring together the prophetic destiny of suffering for God and the messianic vocation of bringing salvation to God’s people, and he helps the disciples walking the road with him to see that this all fits into the big picture of Scripture. Jesus’ disciples had to come to see the tragedy of the last few days not as God abandoning God’s people but as God once again acting in and for the world in a way totally new yet totally consistent with what God had always done.

The fact that the disciples still don’t fully understand is evident in that they still don’t recognize Jesus. But the pieces of the puzzle are gradually falling into place. In the second half of our story, we hear how they get the rest of the way. You know what happens. But like any good story, knowing the ending doesn’t prevent us from appreciating how the storyteller gets there. So let’s delight in watching the drama unfold.

As the trio approaches the village of Emmaus, Jesus acts as if he’s going to keep going. The suspense is delicious at this point, isn’t it? Pretend you don’t know how the story will end. Will the disciples catch on before Jesus leaves them? Would Jesus really just walk away without telling them? Their minds must be buzzing with questions after talking with Jesus about Scriptures. Come on, Cleopas,

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2 Tannehill, 288
wake up! Don’t you see?! The suspense is drawn out even longer when the disciples invite Jesus to stay with them and he agrees. Another chance for them to recognize him!

It’s not unexpected, really, that they press Jesus to be their guest. In that culture of hospitality it would have been strange indeed to travel with someone for several hours and then let that person fend for himself with night coming on. But perhaps even more than culturally appropriate politeness is going on here. During his earthly ministry Jesus had shown generous hospitality to everyone. Maybe these two disciples were simply responding to this stranger as they had seen Jesus respond to so many outcasts while he was travelling.

So Jesus goes in to stay with them and he eats with them. I need to say a word here about the whole theme of food and meals in the Gospel of Luke. It’s not surprising, given Luke’s emphasis on table fellowship, that the climactic revelation in the Gospel occurs at a meal setting. Depending on how you count, Luke records about 19 meals, with 13 of them found only in this Gospel. And there are many more sayings about food and eating. It’s no wonder that Jesus’ opponents call him a “glutton and a drunkard” (7:34). Luke includes so many of these stories about meals because he sees something theologically significant about them. Feasting at the table becomes a metaphor for the reign of God, and as Jesus eats with people— all kinds of people—he embodies what that kingdom of God will be like. It is a place where people will come from east and west and north and south and feast together (13:29). It will be a place where the least important will be invited up to the head of the table (14:7-11). It will be a place where the hungry will be fed and the rich sent away empty (1:53). Many important discussions and teachings take place around the table. So when Jesus sits down with Cleopas and friend to a meal, he is doing what he has done many times already in the Gospel, and we need to pay attention.

Jesus goes in to dine with the disciples but in v. 30 he becomes the host of the meal instead of the guest. Verse 30 contains four verbs. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. That sequence should sound familiar, for it occurs two other times, once at the feeding of the 5000 in 9:16 and once at the Last Supper in 22:19. The one difference is that in ch. 22 Luke uses the verb “gave thanks” instead of “blessed.” The similarity to the feeding of the 5000 is especially strong since both happen when evening is coming on and both times the people “recline” to eat. In all three of these meal scenes Jesus is the host and in all three Jesus is revealed in a significant way to his followers. The feeding of the 5000 is framed by speculation about Jesus’ identity: “who do people say that I am?” After witnessing the miracle of the bread in the wilderness, Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah of God. At the Last Supper Jesus’ identity is revealed through symbolic actions of bread broken for others and a cup that is the new
covenant in his blood. Just as God delivered Israel from oppression at the original Passover and made a
covenant with the people, so now at this Passover Jesus interprets his upcoming death as another act of
deliverance and the making of a new covenant.

The meal scene in Emmaus becomes the final occasion where Jesus the host reveals himself to his
disciples. In v. 16, when Jesus first approached them, Luke says “their eyes were kept from recognizing
him.” Now in v. 31 Luke says the opposite: “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” They
have come full circle. How is it that their eyes are finally opened and they see him? The text doesn’t
explicitly say. Perhaps these disciples saw something sharply familiar in these ritual actions at table with
Jesus and remembered – remembered the feeding of the 5000 and the Last Supper at which Jesus’ own
body and blood became the Passover bread and wine. Or perhaps they simply remembered the many
meals which they had eaten with Jesus, meals at which tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees were
welcome, meals that were signs of the banquet spread in the final kingdom of God. Whatever the case,
when they ate with Jesus, their eyes were finally opened and they saw Jesus as the risen Lord. The funny
thing is that as soon as they recognize him, he vanishes. What a delightful and ironic reversal! I love the
way Luke tells the story. When Jesus is physically present with them, they can’t see him; but as soon as
they catch on, he physically disappears from view.

Luke says the disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem. No matter that it was evening and
time to be safely indoors; no matter that it was a couple of hours of walking. The news that God had
raised Jesus from the dead was too exciting to keep to themselves. And so the story ends as it began, with
two disciples talking with each other about the events that had happened. But what a difference! They
have moved from confusion and sorrow to understanding and joy. Their experience with the risen Jesus
also floods backwards and colours the conversation they had on the way to Emmaus. Whereas earlier
Jesus scolded them for being “slow of heart”, now the disciples say their hearts were burning within them
as Jesus interpreted the scriptures for them. In retrospect they can identify the transformation
happening.

The last verse of our text sums up the significance of all we have seen and heard. The story of the
disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus is a story of revelation and transformation. What
brought about their transformation? Verse 35 tells us that it was two key things, corresponding to the two
parts of our story: (1) It was what happened on the road. In other words, it was Jesus walking with them
and interpreting everything that had happened in light of Scripture. (2) It was the meal they shared with
Jesus; in the breaking of the bread their eyes were opened. Both movements involve an opening.
Scripture is opened for them and their eyes are opened when they eat with Jesus. These two things are what moves the disciples from dejected, hopeless, baffled companions of a stranger to bold, joyful, hope-filled witnesses of the resurrected Christ. Their transformation leads naturally to witness. Such good news cannot be kept to themselves. Meeting the risen Christ and having the eyes of their hearts flooded with light results in their joyful proclamation of all that has happened to them. “Christ has risen indeed.”

These key aspects of the story are repeated in the episode right after this. Jesus once again appears to his disciples who can’t quite believe it even as they rejoice. Jesus does two things. He eats with them and he opens Scripture for them. And then he sends them out to be witnesses in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. In case we didn’t get the essential elements of the Emmaus story, we hear them again in a new key in the final scene of the Gospel.

So what?
The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a much loved and familiar one, but it remains only a delightful story if we don’t ask how it also speaks the word of God to us today. I want to conclude by suggesting five ways in which this text can help us as we try to be the faithful church in the 21st century.

1. Scripture helps us understand and gives us the big picture.

   This is perhaps the most obvious connection to make with this text, given that the theme for this Assembly is “Dusting Off the Bible.” I’ve been using the image of putting a jigsaw puzzle together. The disciples had all the pieces of the puzzle, but they couldn’t put them together without someone showing them the picture on the box. That’s what Jesus did when he interpreted the events of his suffering, death, and resurrection in light of the larger story of Scripture. He didn’t share secret mysteries from the 3 days spent in the tomb; he didn’t speak of heavenly visions. Jesus went back to Israel’s Scriptures. The reports that Jesus was alive were curious but meaningless claims until they were located within Israel’s larger story.3

   This text reminds us to return to Scripture to make sense of the puzzle pieces we are struggling to put together. It invites us to put the story of Jesus and the individual pieces of our own stories into the larger story of how God has always worked with and for God’s people to bring them salvation. Christians are a storied people, and the Bible is our memory book. It reminds us of who we are and from where

we’ve come. As our Confession of Faith says, the Bible is the “essential book of the church,” which nurtures the life and faith of God’s people.\(^4\) Just as the Emmaus road disciples could not see Jesus until they understood him in the larger context of the Scriptures, so also we will not see Jesus clearly nor can we understand what it means to be his disciples without returning again and again to the larger story in our Scriptures.

I suspect we all know this and believe this. That’s why we are spending time these days returning to Scripture. But we also know it’s not always easy. We interpret texts differently, we disagree about the implications of what we read, we come to the text with different expectations, lenses, and life experiences. The answer, however, is not to throw up our hands in despair. The only way forward is to go back to Scripture again and again and again. Although we don’t physically have Jesus walking beside us to make everything clear, we do have the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us. We also have each other, the body of Christ, to help us see things more clearly. All this requires patient listening and persistent questioning. It requires a radical openness to hearing something unexpected and new. It means not jumping quickly to prooftexts to shore up our own beliefs but diligently considering the whole witness of Scripture. This text from Luke 24 invites us, urges us, to soak ourselves in the Word of God and to place ourselves and all the confusing individual pieces of the puzzle into the grand story of what God is doing with and for the salvation of the world.

2. Fellowship in community and shared practice lead to new insight.

Listening to Jesus interpret the Scriptures was absolutely crucial for the disciples to come to understanding, but it wasn’t enough. Their eyes were opened only when Jesus sat at table and broke bread with them. New Testament scholar Richard Hays beautifully captures the import of this when he says, “We do not gain a grasp of Scripture’s significance solely through lectures on the text; we come to understand it as we participate in the shared life of the community, enacted in meals shared at the table.”\(^5\) To say that our eyes can’t really be open to the truth of scripture unless we are practicing it in community is a profound claim, isn’t it? But I think it’s consistent with how Anabaptist Mennonites have always read and understood Scripture. We “see” and understand Jesus not only in libraries and lecture halls, in pulpits and pews, but in the community that re-embodies his practices; we see as we participate


\(^5\) Hays, 417.
in the story together with each other. As I wrote these sentences I was very conscious of where I was, sitting all alone in a room at a retreat centre. Not good enough. If what I’m saying is true, the task of interpreting and studying Luke 24 will not be complete until we talk about it over lunch together, practice hospitality, invite the stranger to join us, pray together, share communion.

Musicians talk about muscle memory. When I marvel that my daughter, who is pianist, can memorize a long Beethoven sonata, she tells me that it’s not her mind that is remembering the notes on the pages, but it’s her body remembering how to move. I think seeing Jesus and following him faithfully involves something similar. It requires developing habits and practices that embody and remember who Jesus was. As the church practices forgiving others as God in Christ has forgiven us, as we generously share our wealth and possessions with others as Jesus gave himself to us, as we share bread with people whom society has forgotten or ignored, we re-enact the practices we have learned from Jesus. We remember in our bodies who Jesus was and we see him more clearly. When those two disciples sat at a table with Jesus, seeing and doing what they had done with him before, their eyes were opened. So may our eyes be opened when we too participate in the shared life of the community, the body of Christ.

3. Revelation is a gift.

In our society, which puts such high value on critical thinking and the individual mind, it’s tempting to think that the disciples finally caught on because they put all the facts together and came up with a logical solution. They listened, they learned, they remembered, and then they put 2 and 2 together, like good rational thinkers. But I doubt that adequately reflects what’s going on in this text. The disciples were blind, and the Anointed One, who was sent to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, opened their eyes to see, just as he had done numerous times throughout his earthly ministry. Certainly interpretation of Scripture and shared practice was part of their coming to see, but ultimately insight and understanding are always a gift from God. As one scholar says, “The cure for [the disciples’] blindness [was] not information but revelation.”

I think sometimes we’re tempted to think that if we just follow all the right steps and work hard enough, we’ll figure things out. We’ll get the biblical scholars to do some sound exegesis, have round table discussions, send out questionnaires, write up our findings and come up with a neatly packaged solution. That probably sounds more skeptical than I mean to be, since I actually believe all those things

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are important. But I think our text is reminding us that there is something more involved. There is a wildness to God’s ways that cannot always be predicted. Clarity of vision is sometimes obscured by mystery, swirling fog, and darkness, and light breaks in when we least expect it. Two and two sometimes equals five when God is in charge. All this is to say that our desire to see Jesus more clearly and to understand his will more fully needs to be tempered with humility and an extravagant openness to being surprised. We need to do all the work we can but in the end, we rely on God, through the Holy Spirit, to illumine our minds and transform our hearts.

4. The resurrection of Jesus makes discipleship possible.

We would not do justice to this text if we did not acknowledge the most important point of all, namely, the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. As I said earlier, the story is as much about the transformation of the disciples as about Jesus. And yet, there would be no discipleship if it were not for the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. When that shocking, glorious truth finally sank in, it turned the disciples inside out and upside down. The resurrection of Jesus is ultimately what changed them from fearful, wimpy followers into bold joyful witnesses. As disciples of Jesus today we stand on the other side of the resurrection. To see and to know Jesus as the resurrected Lord is to confess that sin and evil and death are not the end of the story, are not the last word, neither for Jesus nor for his disciples nor for the church today. And that makes all the difference in the world. I am convinced that one cannot walk the long, sometimes difficult and confusing road of discipleship without the resurrection. Discipleship faith is resurrection faith. It’s one thing to pick up the cross and follow a suffering Messiah who stays dead; it’s quite another matter to follow a Messiah whom God raised from the dead. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we can live in hope even when life seems dark. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we know that God can make the unexpected happen. Because of Jesus’ resurrection we can experience new life now, even when the old creation still groans in labour waiting for the final redemption. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we too will one day be raised to eternal life. Because of Jesus’ resurrection we need no longer be afraid – really, if God is stronger than the power of evil and death itself, what is there to be afraid of. Disciples are people transformed by the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

5. Disciples are “witnesses” who share the good news.
Our story ends with Cleopas and his companion rushing back to tell the others about their encounter with the risen Jesus. They cannot keep the good news to themselves. While they are talking, Jesus appears among them and commissions his disciples to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. He says, “You are witnesses of these things.” Witness is not just something they are to do, but is who they are. We see this coming to fruition in Acts, where the once fearful disciples bear testimony boldly before governors and kings. When Peter and John stand before the authorities in Acts 4, they refuse to be silenced and announce, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:21).

The church today is also called to bear witness about what we have seen and heard. In a wonderful book called *Testimony*, Thomas Long admits that many Christians feel uncomfortable with the idea of “giving testimony” because of the manipulative and off-putting ways that that has sometimes been done. Nevertheless, he says, as Christians we are called to bear witness – in our places of work, over lunch with a friend, at our kids’ soccer game, in the public square. We are called to testify – not to “grow the church” or make ourselves look religious or any such thing -- but “for only one purpose: to tell the truth about what we have seen and heard.”⁷ We must do this both through our actions, in the way we live, and through our words. If we had time, we could share some stories of how the Mennonite church is bearing witness all over the world. I think, for example, of some of the creative ways that congregations have promoted peace in the public square. I think of the stories coming from Witness workers overseas. Like Cleopas and his companion, the church today is called to bear witness in word and deed to the good news of the risen Christ.

Conclusion

Cleopas and his companion were on a journey, as all of us disciples are. They couldn’t see the risen Jesus, couldn’t put the puzzle pieces together until Jesus revealed himself to them through Scripture and in table fellowship. My prayer is that the church today will continue to see Jesus more clearly and to love him more dearly as we immerse ourselves in God’s word and as we fellowship together with all God’s people, a foretaste of the glorious banquet to come!

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