

## Sermon Archive 291

Sunday 26 April, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 24: 13-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In his parallel version of the story of Jesus, last week we had John telling us of a community in lockdown. Frightened by the world, reeling from what had happened to their leader, the disciples had locked the doors and they'd hidden themselves away. While Thomas waited to catch up, a whole week passed from the time they'd begun to think about risen life, but still they're behind the locked down doors. Fear and lock down. Belief formation and lockdown. Lockdown and a risen Jesus. Lockdown, just lockdown!

Well this week, in *his* version, Luke tells the story of the first two followers of Jesus, choosing to peep above the parapet, daring to take their first journey back into the world - the big, wide, violent, strange post-lockdown world. Moving on from lockdown. How's it going to go?

-ooOoo-

Their destination is Emmaus - a village seven miles from Jerusalem. It's seven miles away from Golgotha, the death sentence, and the Garden tomb. It's seven miles away from that great failed social experiment - hypothesis: that it's possible to live life in community and love. It's seven miles from new, emerging stories that they can't quite understand, and don't know how to locate. As they walk away from Jerusalem, going back home, there's a bit of a feeling of walking away from what's hurt them - a sort of post-traumatic "leaving the weird behind" - maybe with that common post-traumatic hope that going back home will bring them some normality.

I understand that - wanting a return to normality, that boring old thing that we just knew so well.

But let's step out of that story, to look at two other stories.

The first story is that of a country that had to go into a lockdown. The normal things we knew were hugs and handshakes. At Church we exchanged the sign of peace. We sat next to one another in pews that were close. John sat by that pillar (where he'd sat with Margaret for sixty years); and Jack sat there, on his cushion, until he died and went to the angels. And there was morning tea - where we sometimes had biscuits, and we poured milk for one another into the coffee. And we drove our cars, and spent our

money, and we consumed more than we needed to, and jostled elbows at the supermarket checkouts.

But then all of that was cancelled, and like disciples frightened of death, we all locked our doors and we pulled the curtains. And we needed to, and it was right and responsible to. And the leaves fell from the autumn trees, and the birds came back to our gardens, and the Himalayas emerged from the smog - first time in thirty years, you know! And then lockdown was relaxed a bit. And within that relaxation, some said "let's go back to normal". The cars. The drowning out of the bird song - the world before we knew what it meant to belong to one another. Is that going to work? Can we do that? Or has something fundamentally changed?

Well, here's the second story, for which we've suspended our story of Jesus and the Emmaus travelers. The second story is the story of war. Great catastrophes come upon our world now and then. They're not viruses, but maybe they are a form of disease. Within that disease, people form arguments, and then they send hundreds of thousands of people off to strange places to sort the arguments out by fighting. It's like a disturbance of the brain, the change of the proper judgment, the loss of the better way. And the ones who endure it at home are never the same. They have to take up tasks no longer been done by those who've gone away. They become capable and strong - and become mothers and father figures in the absence of the other. Or they become receivers of white feathers, because they stand for peace. Meanwhile, those who have gone away suffer all manner of percussive drama. Tucked into a wee hymn book I found on a shelf in my first parish, was a yellowed newspaper clipping. From a time in the mid 1940s, it said something like "This man of yours, who comes back to you, has changed. He is not the same as he was."

We **want** to go back to how things were, before the virus, before the war, before the crucifixion. And so it is that two Emmaus travelers set out for their village, for home - for home - to leave behind what has hurt them just now. Let's go back to how things were - to where and how we used to live! (The bird song pauses, in fearful anticipation. The Himalayas take a breath - in case it's the last clean air they're going to get for a while.)

Back to Emmaus! But because the Christ is risen (whatever that means - they don't yet know what it means), the travelers find a stranger joining with them. They plan to go home, and they're actioning that plan, step by modest step. But this figure from the road joins them, and he moves them to talk about what has just happened to them.

You know how that conversation goes. I've preached it before, and you've listened to it before. All good, and god! This year, rather than talk about the detail of that

conversation, I simply want to say that that conversation makes it clear to them that they can't go back. Their world has changed, and they can't go back.

In the old world, you could walk your private journey home. You could stay within your private thoughts. You could process them in your own contained way, or maybe in the company of an equally tired friend who equally doesn't want to think beyond what he knows. But in this new world, post-trauma, you're joined by a Christ figure who asks you to tell your story, who puts that story next to God's story, with all its old promises from scripture that maybe you'd forgotten. In this new world, your recent experience (your recent trauma) is set within old promises and forgotten expressions of hope. In the old world, where birds couldn't sing, and where mountains were hidden, and soldiers died, you could just hide away. But in this new world, the stranger on the road re-enlivens what your ancestors used to hope for, in a living, heightened way.

Here's another thing.

In this new world of theirs, they innocently break bread - probably because they're hungry after a seven mile walk, and there's always bread at hand, isn't there? It's as common a thing as might happen at any table any evening. But in this new world, suddenly God is present. In this strange place they'd hoped might be normal, nothing is normal. You tear bread in half, and suddenly there God is before you.

Walking home, they seek how things used to be. But things are NOT how they used to be. This new world of theirs is a world into which God is becoming present. Is God in the grand old tree? Is God in that smile passed between you and the one you love? Was God in that gift of giving that you saw on the road? I don't know! I don't think they know. But that's part of how subversive and strange this new world is. In the olden days, God was in a temple. God was claimed to have been in Jesus, but the old world killed that idea - God is gone. But in **this** world, they tear a loaf apart, and God is there. Did they expect that? Is that normal life as they knew it? As they trudge their journey back into "how thing used to be", no, things have changed.

Sufficiently strange is all this, that they decide they need to give up on "going back". Instead they go race to take their news, and their mystery, to the others, who are still in Jerusalem - and who, according to the time frame of that other gospel writer, still are locked away in fear (hiding from the new reality). And when the Emmaus travelers get back there, with their weird news that "you can't go back, because something remarkable has happened, something fundamental has changed", they hear that the others also have encountered the one who broke their bread. When he was with them in Emmaus, so he was opening doors back in Jerusalem. In this new world,

resurrection is happening all over the place - happening to all who loved and followed the One who now is risen One.

In the old world, hope lived precariously in wee boxes of religion and half-uttered creeds. It lived engraved on tablets that could be broken in anger. It was kept solidly in the hands of priests in the temple. But now faith is breaking out all over the place, as people express longing and hospitality. It breaks out as hearts burn on the road that never will work. It breaks out in evening meals, and the running back to Jerusalem. It breaks out while we are here, and the others are there - united only by trauma and wonder, in this remarkable thing called the "vine".

The Emmaus travelers may indeed want to go home, to where everything is as it was. But no. Because the risen One is out and about there, stirring things up, and being found in all manner of place! Nothing ever will be the same.

-ooOoo-

Well; there we were, as a nation, following war, longing to go back to how things were. And now here we are, as a nation, longing to return to whatever normality we think Level Three might bring. What do we learn from resurrection and the new life of God? Do we learn that the old ways are out there, just waiting to be restored, plugged straight back into - that we might drive, and consume, and be distracted, and find our meaning in being well while our planet dies? Going back to how things were? Is that what we learn?

Or, as we hear of an Emmaus road experience, where things change forever, is it that we have learned that a more Christ-connected newness of life is calling us?

He is risen; he approaches us on the road. Bread sets hearts on fire. Nothing is the same. Everything has changed.

As so, we keep a moment of quiet.