

## Sermon Archive 582

Sunday 19 April, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Luke 24: 13-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### The Trauma-acknowledging Community

Investigating yet another murder in the small thatched-roof English village, Miss Marple (or any one of her crime-solving British friends) meets the vicar. Invariably, he wears spectacles (he's a studious fellow who reads too much poetry and botany). Generally, he's playing the organ in the church, his little cocoon from the world. Sometimes he stammers (hesitant and awkward). If ever presented with a question about sex, violence or compromise, he blushes, and almost topples over. In charitable terms, he's naive. In less charitable terms, he's wet.

In the world of clichés, he is the natural ambassador for "church" - church being a community adrift from the harsh realities of life. Church believes in lambs and bunnies. It serves tea and biscuits. Church has little grasp of what real human beings do to one another. Have you heard the expression "too heavenly minded to be of earthly use"? That is fiction's presentation of church.

Enjoying the brilliant opportunity of studying in a German university, I once attended some lectures presented by a local theologian who was getting on in years. His years stretched back sufficiently far as to have made him an almost boy soldier in the Second World War. I'd first come across his work when I'd read his book "The Crucified God". He wrote:

*"Since I first studied theology, I have been concerned with the theology of the cross. This no doubt goes back to the period of my first concern with questions of Christian faith and theology in actual life, as a prisoner of war behind barbed wire . . . Shattered and broken, the survivors of my generation were then returning from camps and hospitals to the lecture room. A theology which did not speak to God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have had nothing to say to us then."*

The wet vicar meets the theologian from the trenches. The parody of Christian faith meets the suffering-soaked thinker.

Post Easter, as things are still sinking in, on their way home to Emmaus, two disciples of Jesus speak out of their trauma. They speak for a new community that

has lost all its naivety. If following Jesus ever seemed like it might have been a flight from the harsh realities (some kind of cosseting), that all had died in those days. The faith-clarifying stranger helps them reflect on the fact that justice sometimes doesn't come. He helps them ponder how punishments are more lurid and cruel than they need to be. He allows them to speak about what it means to lose a friend - to know first-hand what it means to begin to hope, and then . . . well, then to mourn.

What kind of faith is being born on the road to Emmaus? It is a faith whose naivety has once and forever been broken? Indeed, this is a faith saying "God is in the grit". Emmaus faith is dirty and real.

**Hymn Fragment:** Along this road, O God, we set our feet, / bleak thoughts and trauma weigh us sadly down; / until by grace, a stranger we do meet; / calm at our side, he wears the Easter crown.

### **The Now-Blinded Community**

*Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*

Sometimes we stand before things that we are not yet ready to recognise. We cannot see them for what or who they are.

On one side of the coin - It takes one particularly romantic man a number of years to read the signs that everyone else can see, that this project in love is not going to work. The beloved doesn't want to talk, but maybe the excuse is responsibility or busyness. The other doesn't say "I love you", but maybe that's a matter of quieter personality. Deploying great forces of wishful thinking, the romantic is stubbornly blind to what is right before the eyes.

Other side of the coin. Christopher Beha, author of the book "Why I am not an Atheist" describes his journey from the Catholic faith of his childhood into two well chronicled forms of atheism - scientific materialism and romantic existentialism (we love the "isms"). The journey was started when his twin brother was injured in a car accident. He was set off on the road by trauma. He knew what appealed to him in each model of atheism, and what didn't. It was all very philosophically responsible - and lonely and cold. The "no god" world made him feel seriously sad - shame it seemed like the responsible option - and he stayed there for decades. Eventually his "no god" existence tripped over. He fell in love. Back he came, through the experience of love, right back to the conviction that he was a creature of love among other creatures of love, called to consider that God is not a plain fact, but rather is love. For some reason, his coming to see that, to cease to be blind to that, took a good long time. We are

not always (even through eyes of faith with integrity) ready to see what is before us.

The Emmaus travellers come into the company of the Risen One, but are prevented somehow from seeing him. They will see him soon - but not yet. For the moment, it's a matter of traveling with someone they can't yet see or understand.

*How shall we sing the majesty that angels do admire? What language shall I borrow, dear God, to speak of thee?*

Could our time of being people of faith be described as a time of having seen something (the life, the death, the resurrection), but not yet having recognised what needs to be seen? Is there something of Paul's expression "now we see in part, and know in part - then we shall be fully known?"

The faith that comes into being on the Emmaus road is a tutoring of those who - for the moment - only partially see.

**Hymn Fragment:** Bless, God our eyes, that we might truly see / beyond the world's dark view of life as pain, / meeting the Christ as One who now is free / to give us vision, Easter life to gain.

### **The Mystery-engaged Community**

He teaches them. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets (which they kind of already know), he opens the mystery. And later they say "when he did that, didn't our hearts burn within us?" The mystery is opened, and the heart comes to life. On the Emmaus road, trauma is acknowledged, blind spots exist - but in the opening of the mysteries, disciples are moved - they "feel".

While Christopher Beha no longer calls himself an atheist, he retains respect for those who have an orderly, responsibly engaged "no god" world view. He still thinks that scientific materialism is a good model for working out what exists and is true concerning physical things. He still is persuaded that romantic existentialism is an elegant and insightful way of looking at the world - the critical role of human experience. His rejection of atheism was never about its intellectual weakness. It was entirely coherent. But its texts just sat on the paper on which they were written. They didn't burn, or move, or give a shape to life. Christopher didn't want something that he read. He wanted something that he could live.

The Emmaus road takes its travellers to church, where they sing hymns, and say prayers. They pick flowers and give them to people they love - celebrating creation as a gift to be valued. They say grace before meals; they give their

money to the poor. They cultivate mercy; they share their daily bread. They hope. In the Spirit, they dance. And there is something beautiful about it. Did not our hearts burn within us?

PS. Christopher says that the world is in deep need of people who ask "who are we", "what is life for", "what do we owe our neighbours". He also says that most of the asking of these sorts of questions go on these days goes on on Sunday morning in church. Philosophy is read. Faith is lived. On the journey to Emmaus, the disciples **feel**.

**Hymn Fragment:** Praise God for sharing mysteries so bright, / praise God for humble hearts that say "amen"; / praise God for vistas opened to our sight / by which our souls are brought to life again.

### **The Reminded Community seeking continued Presence**

He allows them to voice their trauma. He opens them to the scriptures of old. He touches their blindness for a clearer seeing tomorrow. He sets something aflame in their capacity to feel and hope and thrill. Then, Ah Argent Provocateur, he appears to be carrying on when they must stop. "No, no, Lord", they say. "Stay with us, because it's almost evening, and the day is now nearly over . . ." We don't quite yet know what this moment is, but we don't want it over. There's something in the journey so far we know we need to retain. We don't want to lose this.

Then he breaks bread with them. Lifts the cup for them. And all is clear - a moment of wonderful, ministering clarity. This is who he is. This is who we are. This is how we met, and what it means. And then he's gone . . .

I wonder what the Emmaus community is for us now - for the Emmaus travellers are figures in whom we might see ourselves - people who live in a world of trauma. People who acknowledge our blind spots and biases. People who have hearts that warm, then cool, then burst into fire. People who long for the lingering of the holy presence. People who have become entangled in the death and Easter of Jesus.

Stay with us, Lord Jesus. It's almost evening, and the day of our wondering is almost done. We had our sights set on Emmaus - turn us now from this journey, back to where we need to be - with the words on our lips "He is risen. He is risen indeed".

**Hymn Fragment:** Praise God for insights from remembered past, / praise God for ancient promise made alive, / praise God for burning hearts that longed at last / to find in God a faith in which to thrive.

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