



“Gift of Grace”

Genesis 3:4–7; Luke 24:13–35

Sin is our burden; resurrection is our hope.

For six weeks, we’ve been talking about reconciliation and our oneness in our Lord. Sin is the darkness that pulls us into tribalism of all sorts, blinding us to the twin truths that (1) all humans are made in the image of God, marred by Sin though that image may be and (2) all those who have put their faith in Jesus are reborn into one family, irrespective of the many individual

characteristics to which our world clings. And since it is Sin that is our ruin, we must turn to the defeater of Sin and death for our rescue. Our hope rests in Jesus and nowhere else. The story is told in the tales of two meals -- one of loss and one of unimaginable gain.

The Ruin of Creation

The first meal in the Bible is one piece of fruit shared by Eve and Adam. This was not just any fruit, but fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden called Eden. It was the one thing forbidden to them in the garden. But they chose to trust a snake rather than God and ate the fruit. And their eyes were opened. And what did they see? Only their own nakedness and shame. This was a meal of rebellion, of sin and death, a meal that doomed God’s good creation and all humanity to lives of suffering and hardship. For the choice made by Adam and Eve is the same choice we make, the same choice made by all those who came before us, with one exception. And it is to him that we turn.

The Rebirth of Creation

Cleopas and his wife had wandered around since Friday afternoon. Jesus, their teacher, their Lord, their beloved, had perished in a terrible maelstrom of suffering. Now, on Sunday afternoon, they set out on the walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Not a long walk as distance goes, but a challenging walk through the Judean hills and forests west of the great city.

As they walked, they talked yet again about what had happened. How could it be? What did it mean? Had all their hopes come to nothing but blood and pain? But their contemplation was interrupted when they were joined by a stranger, one who seemed not to know about what had been going on during Passover. In fact, he seemed pretty darn clueless. Nonetheless, they filled him in, even telling him the strange story from that morning. It appeared the tomb of Jesus was empty when the women arrived to finish their work. The women even claimed that angels had said he was alive. Really? As Cleopas and Mary told the stranger the story, their confusion was evident.

Suddenly, the stranger turned on them, upbraiding them for being so clueless themselves. Didn’t they understand and trust the writings of the prophets? Couldn’t they grasp that the Messiah hadn’t come to rescue Israel *from* suffering, but *through* suffering? So he set about helping them see the truth of Israel’s scriptures as they had never seen it before.

When the three of them arrived at the village, the stranger motioned that he was going on alone. But Cleopas and Mary were good people, careful to be hospitable, and had learned something of their Master’s way. So they prevailed upon the stranger to stay and dine with them in their home. In fact, they would shelter him overnight.

The Empty Tomb

Luke tells the story of the empty tomb in a single paragraph. Here are the basics. At dawn on Sunday, the women returned to the tomb in which they had laid Jesus' body. There, they discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb emptied! In a moment of understatement, Luke writes that the women were "perplexed" (meaning something like 'at a complete loss').

Little wonder they were at a loss. John tells us that Mary Magdalene assumed, naturally enough, that Jesus' body had been taken (John 20:13). After all, Mary knew, as do we, that the dead stay dead, that death is a one-way street. Surely, if Jesus' body was gone then someone took it.

But an angel tells the women, "He is not here, he has risen." Jesus had passed through death to life-after-death and through that to 'life after life-after-death' – to resurrection.

We need to be clear about this. Jesus' followers would not go on to claim that Jesus had been resuscitated; i.e., merely restored to a mortal life. Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), but Lazarus had still gone on to die at some point. Lazarus had been resuscitated by Jesus, but not resurrected. The words simply don't mean the same thing.

Having been visited by the risen Jesus in the weeks after his resurrection, his followers would proclaim that in Jesus, God had begun the great resurrection of all people. Later, Paul would call Jesus the "first-fruits" of this great resurrection. Jesus was first and one day, upon his return, we will all follow.

So the man stayed. As they began to eat, he took the bread Mary had set on the table, lifted it heavenward, blessed the meal, tore the loaf, and offered it to his hosts. Cleopas and Mary were both quite famished, so they hurriedly took a piece of the bread and bit into it.

And as they enjoyed that first bite, *their eyes were opened*. Unlike Adam and Eve, whose eyes had been opened to a ruined creation, marked by hurt and loss, Mary and Cleopas could see the rebirth of creation, its utter redemption and renewal. What had been lost had now been found. All this realized in a moment, as their minds absorbed the fact . . . the indisputable fact . . . that the stranger was none other than Jesus. They had been blind to him before, but now they could see more clearly than they had ever seen anything in their entire lives. Culpepper writes:

Cleopas and his companion [probably his wife Mary] discovered at the table that their traveling companion was the Lord himself. They had not planned it as a sacred moment, but in the act of sharing their bread with a stranger, they recognized the risen Lord in the fellow traveler. Fascinatingly, the Emmaus story is the counterpart to the parable of the

rich man and Lazarus. In that parable, the rich man feasts daily but never notices the beggar at his gate or shares his bread with him. From Hades, he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers, but Abraham responds, "They have Moses and the prophets." When the rich man persists, Abraham's final word is, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (16:31). Here again is a story that involves Moses and the prophets and resurrection from the dead, and a story that pivots at the table. The difference between them is what happens at the table. Cleopas and his companion share their table with a stranger and discover that they have been in the presence of the Lord. The rich man took no notice of the beggar until he was in torment in Hades. Fantasize for a moment. What might the rich man have discovered if he had shared his bread with Lazarus?¹

Just a fact

Cleopas and Mary hardly finished their meal before getting up to head for Jerusalem in the chilly night air. How could they sit at home for even a few hours when the whole world had changed? They had to be with their friends and fellow disciples. They had hardly walked into the room to join the other disciples when Jesus, with whom Cleopas and Mary had been eating just a few hours before, also arrived in the room.

¹ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, p. 482). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Nothing would ever be the same. Nothing. How could it be? Jesus had not been merely resuscitated, only to face death again, as would Lazarus. No, Jesus had passed through death to a newly embodied life. He even looked a bit different. Still a body that could eat, but transformed somehow.

What did it mean? It meant, in fact, that all Jesus had said and had done was to be understood in light of his resurrection. Indeed, the Day of the Lord had arrived in him, and the great resurrection of the dead had begun. These believers and generations more would take a long time working all this out. But the fact of it was not to be denied. Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and buried, had been raised to new life by God. What had gone so terribly in the Garden of Eden long before had now been put right. Where there was hate, there would now be love, where there was loss, there would now be gain, where there was death, there would now be life, eternal life, resurrected life.

Beth Felker-Jones writes:

As we live in expectation, active and thirsty, our lives are shaped by the character of God's promises and the kind of future for which we hope. The distinctive Christian belief in the resurrection defines our hope. Resurrection is not reanimation or resuscitation. When we meet the resurrected Jesus, we meet someone who has been transformed. He has not just been brought back to life. He has been raised to a new kind of life. Resurrection is also not about souls going to heaven. Instead, resurrection is for whole people, body and soul together.²

Such a thing cannot be tamed; Easter ought to jolt us, shake us up! We all stress ourselves out trying to cling to things that we cannot keep, whether it is our youth, our money, or our time. All this will pass.

But . . . if we keep our eyes focused on the new life that God gives, a life that will not end, we can live our present life as we were created to live it – loving God and loving neighbor, enjoying and sharing God's good, renewed, and redeemed creation. One people overcoming tribalism and bigotry. All this because . . . He is risen!! Jesus lives!!

² Jones, Beth Felker. *Practicing Christian Doctrine* (p. 226). 2014. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.