

## **DISTRACTED BY DISAPPOINTMENT**

Luke 24:13-35

Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century's most famous theologians, was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland, where he lived and lectured. A tourist to the city climbed on the streetcar and sat down next to Barth. The two men started chatting with each other. "Are you new to the city?" Barth inquired.

"Yes," said the tourist.

"Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?" asked Barth.

"Yes," he said, "I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?"

Barth replied, "Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning."

The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel saying to himself, "I met Karl Barth's barber today." (1)

That amuses me. That tourist was in the presence of the very person he most wanted to meet, but even with the most obvious clue, he never realized that the man with whom he was talking was the great man himself.

It reminds me of Mary's reaction on Easter morning. In her grief, she thinks the man she is speaking to is the gardener. It is not, of course. Until he called her name she did not realize that she was speaking with the risen Christ.

And, of course, it reminds me of that scene on the road to Emmaus, when later that same Easter day, two of the disciples walk for a while with the resurrected Jesus, and they, too, had no idea with whom they were conversing.

Each of the Gospel writers tells the Easter story in a different way. For many of us this fact adds a note of authenticity to these ancient stories. These were the jumbled reports of eye-witnesses to the most dramatic moment in human history, when Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. These were not carefully crafted works of fiction. No one tried to reconcile the differing accounts. They had no desire to convince us these events happened, only to report what they had experienced.

In Luke's account, on that first Easter Sunday, the women took spices and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, but they didn't find Christ's body. Two angels ask them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"

When they returned from the tomb, they told all these things to the disciples, but, says Luke, the disciples did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. So, except for the testimony of the women, things were not quite resolved that first Easter morning.

That is why the story of the two men on the road to Emmaus is so important to Luke's description of the first Easter. Evidently the two men were among those to whom the women shared their story of the empty tomb. These men were on their way to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. We don't know precisely who these men were. The name of one of them was "Cleopas." It has been suggested that the other was Luke himself, and that he omitted his own name out of modesty. We simply do not know.

And we do not know why they were headed toward Emmaus. Perhaps that was their home. Maybe, in disappointment, they had concluded that their grand adventure of following Jesus of Nazareth was over, so they were packing it in and heading back to the lives they had before they met the Master.

We don't know why they were headed to Emmaus. What we do know is that, as they walked and talked with each other about their experiences, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but, Luke tells us, they were both kept from recognizing him.

That's interesting, don't you think? They had been followers of the Master, but now he is walking along with them and they do not recognize him. **Maybe, as with Mary, their despair stood in the way--their disappointment with the way things turned out.** That can happen. You lose hope, you discard your dreams, and you are blinded to the good things that still surround you.

Pastor and author Leith Anderson, as a boy, grew up outside of New York City. During those years he was an avid fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. One day his father took him to a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. Anderson was so excited, and he just knew the Dodgers would trounce the Yankees. Unfortunately, the Dodgers never got on base, and his excitement was shattered.

Years later he was engrossed in a conversation with a man whom he describes as "a walking sports almanac." Leith told this man about attending this World Series game and added, "It was such a disappointment. I was a Dodger's fan and the Dodgers never got on base."

The man said, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first perfect game in all of World Series history?"

"Yeah," Anderson replied, "but uh, we lost." He then realized that he had been so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed out on the fact that he was a witness to a far greater event--the first perfect game in World Series history.

Leith Anderson writes, "I wonder how often the same thing happens to us. We get so caught up in the 'defeats' in our lives, the times when things don't turn out the way we want them to. So we're depressed because an illness continues to linger, or when

people don't treat us the way we think they ought to, or when we face financial difficulties. But we are often so blinded by the pain and disappointment of our 'defeat' that we fail to appreciate the fact that we might be witness to something far greater that God is doing in our lives." (2)

Those are wise words. Don't let temporary disappointments blind you to the good God is doing in your life. Don't assume that any disappointment is God's last word on any situation.

The followers of Jesus certainly thought their dreams had turned to dust. The last thing they expected was to discover that Christ was alive. Perhaps this is why they did not recognize him. They were blinded by their disappointment.

Or maybe it was deliberate on the Master's part. Maybe he wasn't ready to reveal himself to them at this point. We don't know. But it is evident this stranger was preparing these two men for an astounding revelation.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. Cleopas asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" the stranger asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

Then this stranger begins to admonish the two followers of Jesus. He says to them, "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?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

Then we come to one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture: "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their

sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’

“They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.”

It’s a beautiful story of two men who were in Christ’s presence and didn’t even know it until he chose to reveal himself.

**There may be someone in this room today who is distracted from your faith by a great disappointment or defeat.** Maybe you, too, are blinded by your circumstances. You do not even know that, when you are in this room, you too are in the presence of the risen Christ. “For where two or three gather in my name,” says the Master in Matthew 18:20, “there am I with them.”

John Calvin once said that the Bible is like a pair of eye glasses. Think about that for a moment. The Bible is not a spiritual encyclopedia where we go to have all our questions answered. With years of studying the Bible we may never come to a sufficient understanding of why we have disappointments and defeats. There is much in our world and much in our faith that we do not understand. Understanding is not the key to life, however. Faith is. Trust in God is. God’s eyeglasses don’t allow us to see why we are going through a certain situation, but they do allow us to see what step we should take next and they assure us that whatever the future holds, the One who holds the future will never forget us nor forsake us.

You’ve heard the expression that “seeing is believing.” Most of you have also heard the converse of that--that there are some things that have to be believed to be seen. This is true as well. There are two ways to look at life. One is through the eyes of skepticism and doubt. The other is through the eyes of faith and hope. The only people to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection were his followers--people who already believed in him. In other words, you had to believe in order to see. This is a powerful lesson about the nature of faith.

Author Nelson Searcy tells of visiting Disney World with his son some years ago. It was a magical time for them. What they did not realize until it was time to leave the theme park is that the people who first designed the Disney theme parks did something quite creative. They hid discreet images of Mickey Mouse throughout all of the Disney parks and various attractions.

The images are simple--three connected, intersecting circles that look like the outline of Mickey’s head and ears--but they are everywhere. They are etched into pavement, painted on the walls of rides, built into the fences, and arranged in the landscaping. Look for them the next time you are in a Disney park.

Disney World is jam-packed with these subtle Hidden Mickeys, but most people don't see them because they don't know to look for them. Searcy and his son sure didn't. They learned about the Hidden Mickeys just as they were leaving. However, simple awareness is a powerful thing. When Searcy and his son said their final good-bye to Dumbo after learning about these Hidden Mickeys and headed toward the parking lot tram, they started seeing hidden Mickeys everywhere. They began popping out of the woodwork, literally. They had been at the park all day without seeing a single Hidden Mickey, but as soon as they became aware of their existence, they realized they had been surrounded by them all along. (3)

There are some things that must be believed to be seen. So it is with the life of faith. When something happens, either good or bad, some people see a mere incident, or perhaps, a remarkable coincidence. Others, however, see a miracle or the hand of God. It makes a difference whether you are seeing through the eyes of faith or the eyes of skepticism.

**The amazing thing is how often when you are looking through the eyes of faith you see the handiwork of God. Seeing His handiwork, in turn, increases your faith and your awareness of God's presence.**

I believe it was no accident that Jesus had these two men on the road to Emmaus recount all the events of the week just past. He wanted them to focus on all they had been through together and all he had meant to them so that they would be prepared for him to reveal himself to them. I believe that is the value of gathering each week in worship--to put on once more the glasses of faith. I have not a doubt that those who make the effort to be here every week see God's hand at work in their lives much, much more than those who are casual in their worship. That's the way it works. In order to see Christ, you need to believe in him, and you need to be regularly in Christ's presence.

[I also suspect it was no coincidence that these two men became aware of Christ's presence when they broke bread together. "This is my body which was broken for you," they had heard the Master say. And people have discovered Christ in their midst for 2,000 years every time the bread is broken and the cup is shared in Holy Communion. That is why I invite you to receive his body and his blood this day . . .]

Put on the glasses of faith. Take off the glasses of skepticism and doubt--and life will take on new meaning and new wonder. Even those who were closest to him did not recognize him until they shook off their disappointment and despair. But when they put on the glasses of faith and realized he was in their midst, their hearts burned within them in joy and peace that the Lord Jesus Christ was alive.

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1. John Ross, Surrey, England, *Leadership*, Vol. 8, no. 4.
  2. <http://message.snopes.com/showthread.php?t=12654>.

3. Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Dykes Henson, *The Greatness Principle: Finding Significance and Joy by Serving Others* (Kindle edition).