

LIFE BEGINS ON SUNDAY

Luke 24:13–35

Dr. George O. Wood

Luke 24:13–35 tells us of the appearance of Jesus on the road to two of the disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus. Emmaus was a village about seven miles to the north of Jerusalem. These two disciples, one named Cleopas and we don't know the name of the other (perhaps it was his wife), were on their way, and they were talking with one another about all the things that had happened in Jerusalem—basically about the crucifixion of Jesus and about how that morning, certain women of their own company women had brought a report that His body was missing from the tomb and that they had had a vision of angels who said that He was risen. They were talking about these things when Jesus Himself went with them on the road. But since He appeared in a different form—His resurrection body—able to assume a visage that was not recognizable by them, except later, when the disciples would see the nail prints and His side and understand that it was Him, this Jesus went with them. And their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. He began to talk with them about how all the things written about Him in the Prophets and the Law of Moses and the Psalms should be fulfilled. And when they finally came to Emmaus, that good several hour walk from Jerusalem to that little village, He appeared to be going further, but they constrained Him and said, “Stay with us, for the day is now far spent.” So He went in to stay with them and, while they were eating, He took bread and broke it, and their eyes were opened and they recognized Him and He vanished out of their sight.

This is one of the most early accounts of the appearance of Jesus after His resurrection. We live in a kind of culture and society where there's a lot of interest in the supernatural. You see this in the films and in the books of the day, when the big movies of the last few years have dealt with

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supernatural things. A guy that can fly called “Superman,” and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, UFO visitors from outer space and the *Star Wars* trilogy, and *The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Return of the Jedi*, and Yoda, Luke Skywalker, and the Jedi Knights. There have been TV characters that span some years running like Wonder Woman, with magical powers, and Spiderman. There have been UFOs—Unidentified Flying Objects. People wonder, “Is this really real? Are we being visited by extraterrestrial beings?” There is a lot of discussion about ESP. In fact, on the subject of ESP. I heard a story about a man who asked his wife to balance the checkbook. She sat to work on balancing the checkbook and spent all day on it. When he came home that night, he found that she had typed four pages listing all their expenditures and the items for each amount, which included groceries and utilities and other kinds of bills. He finally came to an entry at the bottom, which said “ESP: \$24.21.” He said to his wife, “What does this entry mean—‘ESP’?” She said, “Oh that? That means Error Some Place.”

We’re all interested in “ESP,” right? Most people hope that there is a force out there somewhere that is well-intentioned, benevolent in character, that is trying to get through to us, trying to improve our life. The last place some people expect to discover this power or this force is in church. For many people, church seems like a rather dull place to be. The Christian life often appears more like a call to duty than a call to a feel-good experience. But in reality, the good news or the gospel of Jesus Christ is the story of the most awesome power of all the universe, which has broken through to us. The most awesome power of all the universe has busted through death. That He, the sinless Son of God, the Son of Man, overcame death, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, where He lives to make intercession for us and prepare a place for us, and that He rules and reigns right now in our heart. That He was not only alive then but He is alive in us now.

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The cross will be forever the measure of God's love, and the resurrection will be forever the measure of God's power. How loving a feeling does God have for us? Look at the cross. How powerful is God? Look at the resurrection of Jesus.

The Gospel is telling us that Jesus is with us on the road of life, with us every bit as much as when He appeared that day to these two disciples on the way to that village called Emmaus.

As these two were talking and Jesus comes up and joins them, we find that there are some problems that they have, and I think the problems that these two disciples on the road to Emmaus have describes everyone who sits down seriously and begins to think about life and doesn't know whether or not Jesus has risen from the dead. Their despondency on the road to Emmaus shows us that these early disciples of Jesus, on resurrection morning, were in no frame of mind to invent a story of His resurrection. They were scattering from Jerusalem. They were not meeting in secret rooms, wondering how to plaster over this mammoth defeat called "The Crucifixion." They were frightened and they were scattering because they were shattered. They had no hope. And they were not the kind of people who were easily duped or gullible. These two know that women had already brought a report saying that the tomb was empty and they had had a vision of angels, but they haven't stayed around in Jerusalem to check that story out. There are some people who believe that the whole idea of the resurrection of Jesus Christ began because some women got hysterical at the tomb and came back and told the disciples, and everybody went away believing it on the basis of a vision that some ladies had had who were friends of His. Obviously, that vision would have been laid to rest. Anyone could have gone to the tomb and found the body. But the fact of history is, the body of Jesus was missing and was never produced. These people who were on the road to Emmaus, these disciples of the Lord, were not gullible, easily-duped kind of people.

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They also were people who realized that the empty tomb really didn't mean a thing. There are some people who think that the empty tomb is what convinces us that Jesus has risen. As far as I know, in checking the Gospel records, the empty tomb only convinced one person of the reality of the resurrection and that was a very perceptive disciple by the name of John, who in John 20 is recorded as reaching the tomb and going in and seeing the linen clothes and a napkin in a place by itself, and seeing and believing. And the reason why he saw and believed is that he put two and two together and got four. He knew that the enemies of Jesus couldn't have removed the body and left the grave clothes in this kind of cocoon-like webbing. He knew that the disciples of Jesus wouldn't have stolen the body because he had been with them. And besides, not one of them would have carried Him naked and desecrated His body from the grave. So he was left with one conclusion: The empty tomb must mean a risen Savior.

But other people were not convinced on the basis of an empty tomb. You can go to Jerusalem today and see both the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the more pastoral Garden Tomb. I've been to those places. One cannot, by looking at the evidence of the empty tomb, conclude that Jesus had risen. In fact, these disciples, these two on the road to Emmaus, were never persuaded that He was risen by an empty tomb. They were persuaded by the risen Christ. He came to them. If the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is not real in our life, some things are going to be taking place in us. Maybe initially, we don't feel them on the surface level. But when we're by ourselves and we think seriously about life, where we've come from and where we're going and what life is intended to be, when we're really into thinking and pondering about the great issues of life, if Jesus has not risen for us, some of the same side-effects that occur with these two disciples on the road to Emmaus will be happening in our lives as well.

I. One of them is sadness.

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In fact, in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus asked them, “What are you discussing?” They stood still with downcast faces. One translation says, “They stood still looking sad.” The reason why they were sad was that, for them, Jesus of Nazareth was over at the cross, at Golgotha. He was crucified. And all the balloon of hopes and trust that they had had in Him to be the Messiah had been pricked and they were no more. They were devastated.

In fact, to further attest to their devastation, they used the phrase while speaking to Jesus, who was unannounced to them on the road, “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21, NIV). If you noticed “We had hoped” is in the past tense. It is no longer an active hope. They’re not saying “We’re still hoping.” It’s once in their life. “Up until two days ago, we had hoped that He was the one, but no longer.” What had happened was that, although the cross had not destroyed their love, it had slain their hope and they were sad.

If there is no resurrection of Jesus Christ, it simply means that we are without God in the world.

It means that no one has a sure grasp on God, and everybody’s understanding of God is subjective. It’s based upon what an individual is saying. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only objective, historical proof that’s ever been offered to attest to the reality of God. The whole message of the gospel of Jesus Christ rises or falls, not upon what Jesus says, but upon what He does. And He’s the only leader in all the world that laid claim on founding a faith on the basis of what He did rather than on what He said.

And if He has not risen, we have due cause to be sad, for we are lost. We are doomed to earth.

As has been said, “Life is a 60-yard dash with a brick walk for a finish line.” There is no ability to know why we were born or where we are going or what we are here for. We’re sad because then it means that if Jesus has not risen, then He was, at best, a misguided dreamer and, at worse, a perpetrator of the greatest hoax that has ever been foisted on the human race.

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Well, it is to note that when Jesus is seen as still in death, we are sad.

II. There's also another phenomenon going on in their life if the resurrection of Jesus is not real. That is, their faith in Jesus has been devalued.

We know a lot about devaluation today. If you've traveled to foreign countries, you understand the devaluation of currency like the peso in Mexico or in Israel, where the inflation rate is running at about 1,000 percent a year and practically everyday the shekel gets devaluated in its standing against the American dollar.

Faith can be devalued as well. We know that these two on the road to Emmaus had had their faith devalued. We know that, they called Jesus a prophet as they were going along . That is a real term of respect, but it's not the term that they had called Him just a few days earlier. For the disciples had come to call Him the Christ, which simply means "the anointed one," the one who would be king of God's people, the one who would be our Savior. The one who would be our priest. All that was brought to bear on that word "Messiah"—Christ, anointed one. But His death at Golgotha canceled that idea of Him, so they were back to calling Him a prophet—a term of respect, but not what He Himself had taught.

I realize that, within this audience today, there may be persons whose faith in Jesus has been devalued. Maybe your understanding and opinion of Jesus is far different today than it was some time ago. If it's become devalued, it's because, at one point or another, we take our eyes off of Jesus. We quit looking at Him. We get away from the Scriptures. We move away from vital companionship with Him and with His people.

III. Which brings us to the third side-effect for these disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not only were they sad and not only was their faith devalued, but they were returning to the old life.

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We know that they were returning to the old life because they were leaving Jerusalem, probably heading to Galilee, because they were going in a northerly direction, stopping at Emmaus for the night. They were leaving on the third day. They had not believed the women's story. They had been so confirmed in their unbelief that they hadn't even taken the time to visit the empty tomb that morning. They simply believed it was over and they were going back to the old life.

There's really nothing in life if Christ has not risen. There is really no solid reason for being alive in life. I probably, more than anybody in this room, am at memorial services for people who have died. I probably, more than anybody in this room, have a chance to observe people facing death. Because my calling puts me in contact with people who are going through great problems in life, I really have a heart that goes out to people who are facing the great trials of life and the great losses of life without Christ. There is an emptiness. There is a taking of the cup of life, expecting to find something in it, and when you are young and full of strength it seems so full and there seems that there is so much to drink from, but we kid ourselves because people come to the end and, if they are without God, there is nothing at all in that cup of life. No wonder we are seeing an epidemic in our society of people who take drugs and alcohol to kind of get a lift and get through and dull the aching of the senses. They turn to immorality and self-centeredness and unforgiveness and hardness of heart. All these things are part of the old life, which, when we come to Christ, He replaces with His life.

I. Jesus comes to these two—as He comes to us on the road of life—and when we're around Him and when He's around us, our heart is stirred within us.

Because He is every bit as much here this morning as He was there then. For when He opens our hearts to understand the Scriptures, we become known. If when we're in a worship service or alone and we're in prayer, or when we open the Bible and begin to feel that tug of God pulling at

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our hearts it's the presence of Jesus wanting to make Himself known to us on the road of life.

That is why our heart gets strangely warmed within us, as the Scriptures are read.

I recall the conversion story of John Wesley, the great founder of Methodism, over two hundred years ago. He was passing by a meeting of Plymouth Brethren, Moravian Brethren, one evening.

The preacher in that service wasn't even preaching himself. All he was doing was reading Luther's commentary on Romans 1, that we are justified by our faith in God and not by our efforts, not by our works. John Wesley stopped by the door to listen. As he listened, he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." There is that sense when we're in God's presence and listening to His Word, that our hearts are filled with His presence.

But you know what happens. Jesus intends to pass by. That's what the text of Luke says. As they were going along, they came to where they were going—Emmaus—and He appeared to be going further. But they constrained Him. That is to say, they didn't just put out an invitation, hoping He'd refuse it. Have you ever done that with a person? Invited them out, hoping they'd refuse it, but doing it out of courtesy? But they meant it. A sincere invitation. They constrained Him. They took hold of His arm. They said, "Please, don't go. You must stay with us."

That's so like Jesus. In His resurrection power, He could do anything anybody could ever imagine. He has absolutely all power and authority. But He will not stay in our lives without our personal invitation. He says later, in Revelation 3:20, comparing our heart to a door, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open the door I will come in to him and eat with him and he with Me." But the key is always the latch that locks from the inside. It is our invitation, which makes it possible for Him to stay. Without our invitation, He is going on, further down the road of life—we without Him and He without us.

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Jesus is always making Himself known as the gentleman. He never stays where He is not invited. He never comes where He is not made welcome. That is why it is so important that we have that individual moment in life, where we volitionally open our lives to Christ. Where we say, by an act of will and invitation, “Jesus, come into my life.” It’s no good simply growing up and hearing about Jesus or going to church or knowing people who are Christians or getting the Bible off the shelf every once in a while and reading it. It’s that personal invitation that He seeks. He’s the king of all glory. But He waits for the invitation of love.

When He reveals Himself to us, everything is different. In fact, what begins to change for these disciples and why I’ve called this message “Life Begins on Sunday” is that they, once Jesus is made known to them, begin going a different direction in life.

II. The second thing that happens to them is that they are filled with joy.

When Jesus comes into our life we begin moving in a different direction. Prior to His manifesting Himself to them, they had been heading north to Emmaus and ultimately, on to Galilee. But once He comes to them, they spin around and turn back to Jerusalem.

Whatever the change is in life that is needed for us, Jesus brings it. His presence in our life brings change; whereas, once we were lost, now we are found; whereas once we were trapped in that web of unforgiveness and bondage to drugs and self-centeredness, all kinds of things that pull us down and destroy us, when Jesus comes into our life, He takes us in a different direction. He takes us ultimately to His Father’s house. Then He brings joy in our life. Because He is present, we are filled with joy. We wouldn’t want to be filled with anything else.

So these disciples return that evening to Jerusalem and tell the disciples that He has risen and has appeared to them. They’re filled with joy.

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I've been thinking this week of what it must have been like for those early disciples to have met Christ and to be filled with joy. I suppose there are all kinds of different ways that joy works itself out in our lives. Those of you who are sports fan like I am—and I have to be a sports fan, because I've never been a good sports player. I'm not an All-American tight-end. I'm an All-American TV watcher... of sports. I wonder if that's what happened when the disciples met Jesus after His resurrection. It doesn't strike me that they were bouncing up and down, wild rah-rah kind of joy. It doesn't strike me as that kind of joy. It was joy, but it wasn't that explosive kind. I see it as a different kind of deeper-layered joy. It's the sort of joy that I think I can describe in this way.

My father, all of his life, was a pastor or missionary or evangelist. Sometimes, pastors go through a time of unemployment when they leave a church, prior to coming to another church.

Unfortunately, pastors don't collect unemployment compensation, so it can be rather tough in the pastor's home. I first hand know the times when there was a glitch between churches and you were just really depending on the Lord to supply, and friends, and invitations for my dad to preach and maybe give him an honorarium or something like this. There was a time when dad was in his mid-fifties and was without a church and had gone some months without a church. He just seemed to encounter the phenomenon that often churches want younger pastors in the prime of life. People in their mid-fifties only have ten years until retirement. It was one of those times when nothing seemed to open. I saw him get more and more discouraged. More discouraged. He began running out of the little bit he had in savings. He thought, "I've tried to consciously fulfill God's will all my life," and dad was a good painter, a good worker with his hands, a good carpenter. He could have done that for a trade. He wrestled with, "Do I leave my call to the ministry?" Not that there's anything at all beneath him doing that. It's just that God had called

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him to do one thing and now he was going through this time of confusion as to whether he should go do something he was good at doing, a trade, or continue in the ministry.

A church came along when dad was invited to candidate at a church. Some churches do this. They'll have three pulpit candidates—one this Sunday, one next Sunday, and one the third Sunday, and then the congregation will vote on the pastor they want. It's sort of like horse racing, and the best horse wins. Dad preached the first Sunday. It's a little secret of the trade that if you preach on the first Sunday, you might as well forget it because they're going to forget you three weeks later. It's the man who candidates last that always gets the vote.

Three weeks later, dad had pretty much written off the prospect of being invited as pastor of that church. He had gotten ill. He was home sick. On a Wednesday night, at about ten o'clock, a phone call came through, out of the blue. The man at the other end of the line identified himself as the deacon of this church and said, "We'd like to invite you to become pastor of our church. We voted this evening and you were the overwhelming choice of the congregation."

I'll never forget the joy that suddenly came back into my dad's life. I remember the next morning when he got up, he was all of a sudden feeling better. He put on his coat and put on his hat and went out to start doing some business. It was a whole different change that had taken place in his life because, now again, there was meaning and purpose and he was seeing things come together. I think the news of the resurrection is somewhat like that. It is that sense that God is moving into our life and saying to us, "Everything is alright." There may be broken pieces and there may be misunderstood fragments, but everything is all right. I am with you." It's the kind of a joy that a married couple knows when they've had a bitter quarrel and then they've had the strength of character to truly forgive one another from the heart. It's not this wild jumping up and down kind of joy. It's this joy of embrace. It's this joy deep from the heart. It's the kind of joy that we

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experienced at my mother's passing when she lay in the CCU in her last heart attack. The afternoon came when her life was ebbing from her, and with all of her strength, a few moments before her death, she cried out these words, "Paul! Paul!" Paul is my older brother by five years. Paul was the one member of the family whose spiritual relationship with the Lord was probably not where it should have been. Paul was outside in the hall, and he came when mother was calling for him. He knew instinctively what Mother was wanting to hear. So Paul knelt down by mom's bedside and took her hand and put his lips up against her ear and said to her the words mom had prayed all her life to hear, "Mom, I'll see you in heaven." The last words my mother ever said were, "Paul, Paul." The last words she ever heard were, "I'll see you in heaven." But there was, that day, when we gathered around her still body and offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God, a joy in that room that only a Christian could understand in the face of death, because we will see one another again. And the joy of Christ is real, and the resurrection really happened. And His resurrection in our life really happens when we let Him in. I pray that you know the joy of Easter and that your life goes in the only direction that counts and that's the direction in which Jesus of Nazareth wants it to go.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we lift our hearts in prayer to You. Knowing You are the most important thing in the world and You're here with us today. You give us that quiet and personal certainty that life and love are stronger than death. That You're real and we thank You for that. I pray for people who are here today who You know, because You know every one of our names. They're going through a sense of personal loss and agony and wonderment. I pray that this would be Easter day in their hearts, that You, the great risen Lord, would appear to them and warm their heart and life with Your presence. That this service would mark a change of direction and that You would move in

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and fill their life with Your joy. I pray for younger people here who really don't think about death. Maybe life is going just great and they're on the climb of their career and employment and they've just got life by the tail. Yet maybe they do not have a personal commitment to You. Lord, this is a day when You're coming to them on the road of life. You're saying, "I've got a better direction than the one you're taking. I've got a direction that will really make your life count. I've got a direction that will really bring you wholeness. I've got a way that will really move peace in your life, teach you how to love and fill your life with great purpose and meaning." I pray for young people who feel, themselves, described by that prayer. That this will be a day of resurrection, and Easter in their hearts. I pray for friends, brothers and sisters in the congregation who are facing difficult moments in their life personally—illnesses and losses. You, the risen Lord, are with us and we praise You.

As I ask you to continue to keep your heads bowed, could I, on this Easter day, ask you if you would be willing—if you have not already done so—to invite Jesus Christ into your life? The two on the road to Emmaus constrained Jesus to stay with them and He gladly did. This same Jesus comes to you and asks to enter into your life. I'd like to ask, on this Easter Sunday morning, if you would indicate that Jesus is welcome to come into your life. Make that decision to invite Him in. If that describes you, would you just raise your hand as acknowledgment that today you'd like to invite Jesus into your heart and your life?

Lord, it's so simple. I pray that these friends who have raised their hand will now, just from their heart, say to You, "Lord Jesus, come into my life. Be my Lord and be my Savior." You've made salvation so simply wonderful that all You ever need is our invitation, and You'll come in and You'll completely save us. We want to thank You for that. When You save us, You forgive us

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for all of our sins and You give us eternal life. Thank You, Lord. Life does begin this Sunday for these. Bless Your name.