

*Walking With Jesus*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Isaiah 25:6-9, Psalm 118:19-29, Luke 24:13-35*

Our third Scripture lesson today comes from Luke 24:13-35. Right before this passage, Luke has told us that the women in Jesus' company had gone to the tomb where He had been buried only to find it empty. They raced back to tell the other disciples, but no one believed them save for Peter, who went to the tomb to see for Himself. We pick up the story as a couple of Jesus' followers head out from Jerusalem. Here's what Luke writes: "Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he 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 him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ 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 acted 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. 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."

This story of Jesus' resurrection on the first Easter morning has long been one of my favorites of Scripture. It's exciting because we don't know how it will turn out. It's got a mystery that we know the answers to, but the disciples don't. The details Luke tells us just sparkle, from the downcast faces on the disciples' faces to their ironic question to Him – "are you the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened?" But the one thing that stumps everybody who's ever read this story is the case of mistaken identity. Why would these guys who had been travelling with Jesus for years suddenly not recognize him? Maybe Jesus was wearing a hoodie! Maybe He had on a cloak that covered His face. It would make sense given the potential for sandstorms that could strand a traveler on the road. I think it was simply the power of God stopping Him from being recognized. The world may never know.

But what I learned this week is that mistaken identity isn't all that uncommon. I have a story to share with you from a good friend of mine named Justin Simmons. He and I met in seminary, and he is helping to plant a church down in North Carolina. He and his wife moved down there just eight months ago, and to make ends meet while they work at building the church, he has a job as a pizza delivery guy. Imagine this happening on, no kidding, April Fools Day. He walks in from a delivery, and his manager suddenly asks him...“You don't have a kid in Burlington, do you?” Justin said, “Um, what?” His manager asked again. “You don't have a kid in Burlington, do you? I got a letter from County Child Support wanting to know how many hours you work and how much money you make.” Being a pizza delivery guy, Justin thought them wanting to know how much money he made was pretty hilarious in its own right. Great joke, right? But nope, nothing...this was the real deal...they had his name and social security number. As Justin put it, “My embarrassment was matched only by my wife's patience and humor.”

So the next day, Justin calls into the County Child Support office, but the joke is still on him. The first thing they ask him when he calls in is, “What's the mother's name?” “That's a really good question!!!” So he gets transferred around until he can finally explain the situation. He has to wait yet another day until a social worker can get back to him.

So April Fools extends on to April 3 when he finally get a call back. She gives him a couple names and asks if he recognizes them, which of course he doesn't. Then the social worker finds out that Justin's only been in North Carolina a short time and she says something like, “You've only been in North Carolina eight months? How do you have a kid here?” She starts putting all the pieces together. As it turns out, there is another Justin Simmons in North Carolina who shares my friend's birthday. They put in his name and date of birth, and voila! Suddenly my friend is being pursued for child support. Thankfully, Justin has been saved by his middle name, which is proof he isn't who they thought he was. He's completely cleared...at least until this other Justin Simmons does something else to get my friend in trouble.

This completely bizarre story that happened to my friend also happened to remind me of today's Scripture lesson. Just like my friend Justin was mistaken for someone else, so too did the disciples on the road to Emmaus mistake their travelling companion. It turns out that we make this kind of spiritual mistake all the time. There are two errors that are common to us today that both of these disciples fell into. We either think we're walking with Jesus and we're not, or we don't recognize Him when He's right beside us.

We get our first clue about where these disciples are at spiritually when they describe how they see Jesus. They really aren't sure who Jesus is. They call Him a prophet powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. They're giving Jesus real credit, but they don't say that He's the Christ, the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior of Israel. They say that they had hopes He might be the redeemer of Israel. The term they use in Greek means that they thought He would be the liberator, the one that would free Israel from Roman rule. They've heard word that Jesus is alive – but we know they are downcast. They don't believe it. They haven't seen Him alive, so they doubt. They really don't know what to make of it all.

These disciples are well-meaning; they have probably followed Jesus for a while and have listened to His teachings. They are obviously heartbroken over His death. They can't get it out of their minds and discuss it even with strangers trying to make sense of it. But spiritually, they aren't yet truly walking with Jesus. They don't yet really know Him for who He is.

And this is the same trap we sometimes fall into as well. We think we're following Jesus because we pay our taxes and play by the rules and try not to hurt others. Some of us know Jesus only as a moral teacher who taught ways to live right. We follow some picture of Jesus we've gotten from culture or a magazine or a movie or even a friend, a picture of an ever-smiling handsome European who loves everybody and wants us all to be good. This Jesus promises us good lives and good jobs and positivity and a better career and a better life if we just get on board and come to church and say we're sorry. It's not the real Jesus, but we often walk with this substitute because the fake is easier to follow. In Jesus' day, many people followed Him because they wanted Jesus to fulfill their desires and wishes too. If we're not careful, we follow the Jesus we've created rather than the Son of God.

But Jesus knew the hearts of these disciples, and He wasn't going to let them stay lost in their idea of who He was. Jesus explains to them from the Scriptures who He really is. Why did Jesus come down to earth? It wasn't to liberate the nation of Israel from Rome. And it wasn't to make our lives better. He came to set us free from sin, from all the wrongdoing that separates us from God and puts us under God's judgment. He goes back through the Scriptures to show Cleopas and his friend that God has always wanted to be in relationship with us, and that relationship requires us to follow Him and love Him and obey Him. Throughout history, we've broken our side of the bargain. The laws of the Old Testament just go to prove how we are the enemies of God, people who don't love Him and continually break His commands and do those things that must be punished if God is truly just. The Old Testament shows that no one, not even Moses or David or any of the heroes of Israel, was without sin; everyone, even the most righteous person, doesn't meet God's standard.

And thus the Old Testament points out the need for a Messiah, a Savior, one who can bridge the gap between God and humanity and become the ransom paid for our sins. The Savior has to suffer and die because He is the sacrifice. He takes our place. We who have broken God's law deserve to die, but Jesus dies in our place so that all of us who accept Him might have eternal life, free of punishment, free of guilt, and free of shame. And that Savior, that Messiah, must be somehow both God and man, one who is free from all sin as only God can be but also human so that He can relate to us and serve as the wonderful substitute for us.

Jesus hasn't come first and foremost to make our lives better; He has come first and foremost to save us from ourselves and from the judgment that we deserve. He's come so that we may be free from sin and free to be the righteous, holy people God created us to be. And that re-creation, that transformation that Christ empowers, that transformation from a person filled with sin and death and judgment into a person filled with love and joy and kindness and peace and all the fruits of the Holy Spirit, *that* is what makes our lives far better.

Jesus explains this to them on the road to Emmaus, and He tells them how the Scriptures teach the Savior must enter His glory. For it's not just Jesus' death that matters. As the apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless, for you are still in your sins." The reason we celebrate today is because Jesus returned from the dead! His resurrection proves that He has conquered sin and death and the grave. Through His resurrection, we know that we who turn from our sins and have a living faith in Jesus Christ will live eternally with Him. We ourselves will be resurrected at the end of time, just as Christ was resurrected! That good news is what Easter is all about. If we truly turn from sin and accept Jesus' free gift of salvation and act on it, we will be saved!

But there are also times in our lives that we are walking with Jesus but don't realize that He is right there in our midst. Here's what I mean by that...in Matthew 28:20, Jesus tells His disciples after His resurrection, "Know this: I am with you always, even until the end of the age!" Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with every single true Christian. Through the Spirit, Jesus empowers us and strengthens us; He gives us courage and comfort and gives us the ability to face every trial and task in our lives. But so often we forget that He is walking with us. We think we have to do it on our own. Just this Wednesday, in our daytime Bible study, we were talking about forgiving those who have sinned against us, who have made us suffer, and who take no responsibility for their actions and don't want to be reconciled to us. And all of us, myself included, talked about just how hard that is. We read passage after passage in the Bible where Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us to the point we couldn't ignore it. And the question in the air was, how? How is this possible? How can Jesus ask this of us? When the conversation was finally done, we talked about how it is impossible for us on our own to do this. We can't forgive on our own. We have a hard enough time forgiving somebody who cuts us off in traffic. I mean, really...how many of us have somebody scoot out way too fast in front of us and we lean out the window and say, [*waving*] "God bless you!" And how hard is it when that person is close to us and has cut us to the quick?

But if we just let it go at that point and say, "Well, I guess I'll do my best to forgive," we've forgotten that Jesus is walking with us. If Jesus says we must these things, if He says we must love our neighbor as ourselves and love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, if He tells us we must forgive, He will give us the power to do it. Through His resurrection, He is with us to empower us! In Romans 8:35-37, Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Paul doesn't say, "in these things we might conquer." He doesn't say, "We could conquer." He says, "We are more than conquerors!" The word in Greek means that we are utterly victorious. In Matthew 19:26, Jesus tells His disciples that, "with God all things are possible." Because Jesus died and rose again, not only are we forgiven, but we have the power to forgive. Not only are we shown mercy, but we are given the power to show mercy to others. If we see that Christ is indeed walking with us, we will not "just try to be good" because we'll remember that it's not about us. Easter is about Christ, who rose again so that He could live within us and become one with us so that we would become new creatures, born again, doing what He commands as our Lord and Savior and God.

The great news about Easter Sunday is that we learn that God wants us for His children. I was telling you my story about my friend Justin a while ago, and his story ended on a sad note. He was happy that he was no longer being pursued for child support he didn't owe. But as he wrote on his blog, "I'm reminded that there is a story. There are people involved...broken relationships, hurt, selfishness, overwhelming pain, and a young child without a dad. My heart breaks for the child. In all of the messiness of life and though all the poor decisions, I believe beyond all else that there is the hope of redemption." Many of us know this sort of situation personally. We can relate.

But in comparison, what's so wonderful about Easter is that it is our adoption day. God didn't need to bring us into His family. Our choice to sin separated us from Him, and God had every right to leave us out in the darkness. He has no more obligation to make us His children than my friend Justin has to take responsibility for another man's child. But God chose through His Son to adopt all who would believe in Christ. As Romans 8:13-16 says, "For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because all those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery that leads you into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption. And by the Spirit we are enabled to cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Because of Easter, all who believe in Christ and are led by the Holy Spirit are indeed God's children. When we come to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we know that we have a Heavenly Father who loves us and cares for us. Our lives, as torn and broken as they may be, are redeemed through His love and adoption. And we as His children are supported by His Holy Spirit, who guides and directs us and points us in the ways that Christ taught.

When these two disciples ate with Jesus, their eyes were opened and they realized just what had happened. They knew the power of the resurrection because they'd seen it with their eyes and had it explained to them by the One who holds the power over life and death. They raced back to Jerusalem to find the others and to tell them that the stories were true...Jesus is alive! It was their cry in the streets...Jesus is alive! It is the reason we gather here today to celebrate...Jesus is alive! We can say it together because it's true...say it with me...Jesus is alive!

Jesus came to bring us to life, eternal life, and to free us from sin and death. Have you experienced that freedom? If not, I invite you to give your life to Christ today and accept His gift to you today. Be set free from the power of sin and death and be transformed by the power of the living Christ. And don't let this be your only day in the church this year. Let this be the start of a long-term relationship with God, one that strengthens and grows as you learn more about Him and travel on your journey with other brothers and sisters who also want to walk with the Savior.

May we leave here today knowing that our God is an awesome God, a glorious God, who raised His son Jesus from the dead! He has made us His sons and daughters forever! Give Him the praise and glory forevermore!