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Sunday 23 April 2023

The Third Sunday of Easter

The Rev’d Dr Michael Hopkins

**Call to Worship**

Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

On this Sunday, our service focuses upon the story of Jesus and the road to Emmaus, where Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his companions, and their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.

As we gather today as Christ’s family, may we recognise Christ’s presence with us, and may God give us receptive hearts to meet him here and through the days ahead.

Let us worship God.

**Opening Prayer**

Living God, we praise you, you are indeed good.

You hear both the cries and the whispers of our hearts.

You know every aspect of our lives and you still love us with unfailing love.

You invite us to know you better, and we thank you for that privilege.

Help us to embrace it every day of our lives.

God, you know how broken we can find ourselves sometimes,

and we acknowledge that before you.

Sometimes, like those on the road to Emmaus, we do not recognise you.

At other times we only realise much later on that we were in your presence.

Sometimes we never noticed you at all.

If we have missed any opportunities to speak a word of healing or encouragement

to someone in need, we’re sorry God.

*Silence*

Thank you, God, that you bring peace, forgiveness, and a new start. Amen.

**All Age Introduction**

When I was a child, there was a Disney film called "Now You See Him, Now You Don't". It's a funny film about a college student who developed a secret formula that you could spray on objects, even people, and make them disappear. In the film, a gang of crooks tries to steal the formula to help them rob banks. It is a very funny film.

Of course, there is no secret formula that can make things disappear and reappear, but there is a story in the Bible where Jesus seemed appear and disappear to his followers. They didn’t recognise him, then they did, and then he disappeared.

You could also link in cloak of Invisibility in the Harry Potter books, if you’ve read those.

We’re going to hear that read now.

**Reading** *A short form of Luke 24*(abridged by MH)

On the evening of the first Easter Sunday two disciples were walking to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. They were deep in conversation, thinking about Jesus dying on Good Friday. In the middle of their conversation, Jesus came up and walked along with them, but they did not able recognize who he was. He asked them, "What are you talking about so intently?"

Then one of the disciples, called Cleopas, said, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?"

Jesus said, "What has happened?"

Cleopas explained that Jesus had been betrayed and killed, and they were all very upset that he had died, and that was three days ago. Some of their women had confused them. Early this morning they were at Jesus’ tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of their friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn't see Jesus.

Cleopas and his friend still didn’t realise that the stranger walking with them was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, "You are very slow. Don't you realise what happened?” Then he explained everything in the Scriptures that referred to him. They came to the edge of the village where they were going to. Jesus acted as if he were continuing, but they asked him to stay and eat with them.

Jesus sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment they suddenly recognised him. And then he disappeared. They were very very surprised, and ran all the way back to Jerusalem. They found the other disciples, and told them how they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread.

**Sermon Notes**

Where is Emmaus?

Although tours and pilgrimages in the Holy Land visit “Emmaus”, but very few places have any actual evidence to support being the Emmaus in the Bible Story. There are several places that claim to be Emmaus. One is Emmaus Nicopolis (18 miles from Jerusalem); another is Kiryat Anavim (7 miles from Jerusalem on the carriage road to Jaffa); another is Coloniya (4 miles from Jerusalem, also on the carriage road to Jaffa); another is el-Kubeibeh (7 miles from Jerusalem, on the Roman road to Lydda); yet another is Artas (6 miles from Jerusalem); and the final claimant is Khurbet al-Khamasa (10 miles from Jerusalem on the Roman road to Eleutheropolis).

What does the name Emmaus mean?

One of the oldest extant versions of the Gospel of Luke, preserved in an ancient text called the Codex Bezae, does not name the place as Emmaus, but "Oulammaus". In the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, this strange word Oulammaus occurs somewhere else, and that was the place where Jacob was visited by God in his dream, while sleeping on a rock (Genesis 35). However, Oulammaus was not a real place name at all, but was created only by an unfortunate translation mistake. The original name of that place in Hebrew was "Luz", and this mistake in the story of Jacob has, of course, long been corrected, but it was still there at the time when Luke’s Gospel was written around AD100.

Is Emmaus unique?

The story of Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18) underpins the story of Cleopas and his friend with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend walk along the road to Emmaus discussing the death of Jesus and the events which surrounded it. Though they do not recognise him, Jesus joins them and together they discuss the Scriptures. Later, we are told that their hearts burned within them as Jesus spoke to them. Arriving at their home, they invite Jesus to stay with them; he is reluctant to come in, but agrees and they eat together. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, Abraham is joined by the Lord, they eat together and, later in the story, beyond what we read today, when Abraham and the Lord travel to see Lot, Lot invites the Lord to stay with him. The Lord declines, Lot insists, the Lord decides to stay with Lot and together they share bread. The stories are very similar, indeed change the names and it’s pretty much the same story, and, most crucially, the Gospel of Luke was written partly for the worship of the early church, and on the day when the Jews would read the story of Abraham and Sarah, the Jewish Christians used the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The story of Emmaus, then, is one of God journeying with his people, of God being with his people in their darkness and, ultimately, of God bringing life out of death and the creation of a new community.

What does all of this mean?

It is much more important to consider not, is this story true, but what truth does it tell us? We have a story to remind us that the risen Christ is with us, just as God was with Abraham and Sarah, and with Jacob. The important message of the story of the road to Emmaus, then, is that the risen Christ is with his people today, as he was with Abraham and Sarah, with Jacob, with Cleopas and the disciples, so he is also with us today.

Luke wants to tell us is that this story of the road to Emmaus is not something that happened once in history, but something that happens always and everywhere. This is why there are so many parallels with the Abraham and Sarah, and with Jacob. This story of the journey to Emmaus, and its antecedents, is not primarily a story of something that happened, but a pointer towards, and a reminder of, something that is happening now. Just as God came to Abraham and Sarah, just as God came to Jacob, just as the risen Christ came to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, God is coming to us today, in this place, in this community, in this week. And from that comes the challenge of how we might recognise him, and how we will we point him out to others.

It would be a great loss, and indeed miss the point the whole point, if we were to allow the story of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus to become history, and so to be imprisoned in the past. I suggest that the point is that the early Church took the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and of Jacob, and re-worked them with their unshakable belief in the risen Christ, and we too must take the story of Emmaus and apply it afresh. Nothing is impossible for God: God is able to bring light to our darkness and life out of death, if we recognise it.

So, what we are about today is having our eyesight adjusted, so that we can see the risen Christ, having our hearts prepared to believe in the risen Christ, when we read the Bible, and when we gather with others that believe.

Perhaps you may sometimes find your hearts mixed up, or sometimes find everything is difficult or complicated, or sometimes find it hard to recognise the risen Christ at work among us today? The story of Emmaus tells us that this is precisely when the risen Christ is closest to us, and is ready to open our eyes.

The sheer strangeness of this story, the awkwardness of its history, ought to trip us up every time we read it. It’s an amazing, startling, story that sends us back the other way. When our strategies put us in charge, our vision, our priorities, we God is dying, and living, to meet us when we least expect it and to turn us round on the road over and again, and put us right by mercy and grace.

**Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

God of invitation, thank you for your presence in our lives.

Give us open doors and open hearts, to share hospitality in your name.

We hold before you who have been rejected or made unwelcome,

those who struggle to fit in,

those who do not know what it is to be loved.

Show them your love, and help us to be people who show your compassion.

Thank you for those who have welcomed us,

those who make such a difference in ways seen or unseen,

those ready to give, to share, who stretch out their arms to those in need.

Bless and strengthen them; and help us to show our gratitude and support.

Guide those in power and authority,

that they would see how to help the poorest and most vulnerable – and act on it,

that the world may become a kinder and fairer place.

As you walk beside us, show us how to draw strength from you,

and grow in knowledge of you, that our hearts too might burn within us.

We pray all these things in the name of the risen Jesus. Amen.

**Prayer of Dedication**

Living God,

as we serve you giving our time, our money, our skills, and our energy,

may we meet you on the road,

and may we be aware of your presence with us,

with hearts open to everyone we meet on our journey through life. Amen.

**Blessing**

The service has ended.

Go in peace and joy, and the blessing of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

is upon you, and all God’s people, now and forever. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| *Christ is alive! Let Christians sing* | 260 | 416 | 297 |  |
| *Jesus calls us here to meet him* |  | 510 | 28 |  |
| Jesus Lives! | 239 |  |  | 373 |
| *Shout for joy!* |  | 676 | 598 |  |
| *Christ is the King!* | 571 |  |  |  |
| *We have a gospel to proclaim* |  | 363 | 418 | 728 |
| *On the journey to Emmaus* |  |  | 308 |  |
| *I want to walk with Jesus Christ* | 367 |  |  | 302 |
| *Light of the Minds that know him* | 529 |  |  |  |
| *Christ be beside me* |  | 577 |  |  |
| *Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us (Living Lord)* | 373 |  | 594 | 435 |
| *Jesus stand among us* | 565 |  | 30 | 381 |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* StF – *Singing the Faith* MP – *Mission Praise*

You may also want to explore Bob Hurd’s lovely Journeysong which is sung to the tune Land of Rest. <https://www.ocp.org/en-us/songs/16192/journeysong>