

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### **EASTER FIRE**

**Luke 24:13-35**

**Third Sunday after Easter, April 6, 2008**

This is another one of those great and immortal short stories of all time. In the late afternoon when the darkness lifted from Golgotha and the sun was full upon Him, Jesus cried out in triumph and breathed his last. But those gathered around the cross did not recognize His victory. As Christ hung motionless, the warm sun spread over His spilled blood. As those who had hoped in Jesus slowly trudged away from the scene, the icy finger of death tightened about their hearts in chilling, numbing grief. When at dawn on the third day the women found the tomb empty, still no one suspected resurrection. It appears that they did not believe even after the angel announced He had risen. And when Peter inspected the empty tomb, instead of believing, he went away wondering.

Indeed, all those who had followed Christ were still in despair that afternoon, though they had heard bits and pieces about the empty tomb. Let us pick up on the story that tells us of two devastated men who were walking towards the sunset. It has been suggested that that is the very reason who they did not recognize Jesus. Emmaus was west of Jerusalem. The sun was sinking, and the setting sun so dazzled them that they did not know their Lord. However that may be, it is true that the Christian is a person who walks not towards the sunset but towards the sunrise. In the Old Testament, it is said that the children of Israel journeyed in the wilderness towards the sun-rising. (Numbers 21:11) Always keep in mind, the Christian goes onwards, not to a night which falls, but to a dawn which breaks, and that is what, in their sorrow and their disappointment, the two on the Emmaus road had not realized.

They **“had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”** But a *“Messiah”* who managed to get Himself imprisoned and handed over to the Romans who then crucified Him was a disappointing delusion. They had supported Jesus and because of that their life had not been easy. Now they ached with grief and confusion. The Scriptures promised a Messiah and they thought Jesus was the one, but Jesus did not deliver. They needed a word from God.

Did God care? Indeed He did! And our resurrected Lord understood perfectly the confusion in their hearts. The two moved ever so slowly along the road to Emmaus. Others rushed past them, but they did not even notice. But the resurrected Christ knew not only their geographical location but also the terrain of their souls. The omniscient Savior understood! As the Psalmist wrote, *“You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways.”* (Psalm 139:2-3). We may feel insignificant and alone, but when we see Jesus fresh from the cosmic trauma of death and resurrection monitoring the footsteps and heartbeats of a despairing couple, we know that we too are known and loved.

**We do not know how Jesus positioned Himself to intercept the couple.** They were apparently prevented from recognizing Him. *“He asked them, ‘What are you discussing together as you walk along?’”* One of them, named Cleopas, asked Him, “Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there in these days. What things? Jesus asked. Cleopas responded to Jesus’ initial question with depressed, biting sarcasm. Cleopas said it all, his confusion, his depression, his disillusionment, his shrinking faith, his anger. And did Jesus reject him? Of course not. Jesus coaxed the couple to reveal their true thoughts, which were by and large their doubts. And when they did so, he answered. Our Lord honors spiritual honesty. For example, in the opening four verses of Habakkuk, the prophet used powerful and emotive language too honestly express his complaints and questions. And God answered His depressed prophet so wonderfully that Habakkuk experienced prophetic ecstasy: *“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food. Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful to God my Savior. **The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights.”*** (Habakkuk 3:17-19). Our Lord invites honesty from His people. This is not to suggest that we are called to trumpet our doubts to those around us, especially to the young and uniformed, but He wants us to tell Him the truth. He knows anyway.

**A Real Revelation:** This story tells us of the courtesy of Jesus, He would not force Himself upon the couple. God gave to men the greatest and the most perilous gift in the world, the gift of free-will. We can use it to invite Christ to enter our lives or to allow Him to pass on. So arriving at the

couple's lodge, they strongly urged Him to come in. The word carries the idea of force. They insisted and we can understand why. When the preparation for the evening meal was completed, everyone is called to the table. ***“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.”*** Many believe that the moment of recognition came when, as He broke the bread, they saw His nail-pierced hands. That may well have been. The breaking of bread in Jesus' life, the feeding of the five thousand and the Passover table were “an inimitable gesture of self-revelation.”

How they were jolted! Surprise, Cleopas and friend! Surprise, citizens of Emmaus! Surprise, world! **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!** That explosive moment was burned into their minds for eternity. And He was gone. But they were left with Easter fire; “They asked each other, ‘we're not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’” Their winter of the soul was gone forever. So it is when the Scriptures come alive in your soul with the centrality and reality of Jesus Christ.

Sensible Palestinians did not travel lonely roads at night, for fear of thieves and muggers, but the two disciples could not keep their news to themselves. “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 he two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when He broke the bread.” This was the beginning of what would become the fellowship of burning hearts, a band that would bear potent witness of Christ to the entire known world.

At this very moment Christ knows where we are. He knows the geography of our lives inside and out. He knows the temperature of our souls. He knows whether there is ice or fire. Whatever our state, His method is the same, to meet us where we are with His own person framed in the beautiful context of His Word.

The life-giving, energizing truth is that Christ suffered and died for our sins “according to the Scriptures,” (I Corinthians 15:3-4). He is the Savior prophesied on Mt. Moriah, the atoning Lamb of the Passover, our tabernacle and temple (for He is our sacrifice and our priest), our manna-bread of

heaven, the Suffering Servant who was “numbered with the transgressors,”  
The Son who suffered separation from the Father for us when He bore our  
sins.

He delights to bring fire to cold hearts. We do not need more light, we need  
heart!

Our fellow-suff'rer yet retains  
A fellow-feeling of our pains;  
And still remembers in the skies  
His tears, His agonies, and cries.

**The Lord of Heaven brought about:**

- His super-exaltation.
- Our exaltation.
- His intercession for us.
- His presence with us.
- His power through us.

This is why the Church makes the confession: “Beyond all question, the  
mystery of godliness is great. He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the  
Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on  
in the world, was taken up in glory.” (I Timothy 3:16).