

## Revelation on the road

Over the last two weeks in church, we've looked at times Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. On Easter Sunday, it was his appearance in Matthew's gospel to Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Zebedee, and last Sunday it was Jesus' appearance in John's gospel first to the other disciples, and then to Thomas, in a locked room.

These accounts are quite different – but they're both quite mysterious. In Matthew's account, the women were rushing from the empty tomb to tell the disciples the good news of Jesus' resurrection, when we read that "Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him." (Matt 28:9)

John's account tells us 'On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"' (John 20:19).

They're both mysterious. They're both strange. Suddenly Jesus met them. Jesus came and stood among them. The reactions of the two Marys, and of Thomas and the other disciples, is of joy and worship. But they were all coming to grips with something that was unbelievable. Their friend, their teacher, their messiah, was dead, and now was alive.

They should have known, of course, because Jesus had told them that this was going to happen. But I think that once they had seen Jesus give himself up, and be beaten, and be raised up to die on the cross it would have felt pretty final.

The account of an encounter with the risen Jesus that we have heard today, from Luke's gospel, is quite different again, but also very strange too.

Luke tells us that two of Jesus's disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and as they were walking they talked about everything that had happened. No doubt all the things they knew about and had been part of throughout Jesus' ministry, but especially from Palm Sunday, through to the crucifixion – and probably speculation about the reports of Jesus' resurrection. Verses 15 and 16 tell us "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"

We read that the unrecognisable Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

That would be a fairly normal thing to ask as you joined other travellers on the road. "Oh, hi... what are you talking about?"

On this particular road, on this particular day, though, it was an odd question. We heard that they stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

They're all walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It's a bit strange that someone who must have been in Jerusalem doesn't know what's been going on. It's been big news.

But Jesus – still unrecognised – asks them. "What things?"

So Cleopas and his friend tell him "About Jesus of Nazareth... 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."

They'd hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Only hoped. Despite Jesus' claims, despite the evidence that they must have experienced or known of (the miracles, the healings, the declaration of the people on Palm Sunday and so on), it seemed they hadn't recognised Jesus as the Messiah who had been prophesied.

So it seemed that the hope was over... but then they tell this stranger "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."

They have all this information. But they haven't put it all together.

And then Jesus puts it together for them – and it seems he's a bit exasperated with them as he does so "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

He challenges them, and asks "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Yes! Jesus had to be betrayed and die in order to fulfil God's plan.

And then, patiently, as they walk along, Jesus explains it all to them. All those Old Testament prophecies that have been fulfilled by Jesus in his life and death – and in his resurrection.

Likely things like the location of Jesus' birth being Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that his ministry would begin in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2) that he would teach using parables (Psalm 78:1-2), that he would ride into Jerusalem on a Donkey (Zechariah 9:9), that he would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3), that he would die and his blood would be poured out for the atonement of sin (Leviticus 17:11), and so on. And on – because when you start looking, you find that there are literally hundreds of prophecies fulfilled in Jesus.

When they drew near to Emmaus, they were so interested in what Jesus was saying, they urged him to go with them into Emmaus, instead of continuing on his way. Clearly a connection was made between Cleopas and his friend and this stranger who had these amazing insights to who Jesus was.

But still they hadn't realised. It had all been explained to them, but they didn't 'get it'. That's one of the things I keep coming back to when I talk to people about Jesus – it's just not about knowing things about Jesus, about knowing good arguments for who Jesus is, it's about knowing him in our hearts. Taking that leap of faith to trust in him.

That idea is put eloquently by Paul in one of my favourite bible verses – 1 Corinthians 1:18 "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Cleopas and his friend had heard all the evidence, and now they invited Jesus to join them in Emmaus.

We read that "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." A fairly normal thing to do... but on this occasion it was special, because "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him".

This fellow who had been walking with them for hours, sharing the story of the messiah from Moses and the prophets all the way to the crucifixion to the resurrection, was that Messiah. Was the very same Jesus who was dead and was alive again.

And then, after that moment of realisation, he was gone.

But what Luke records is not that they were surprised or disappointed that Jesus vanished from their sight, instead he tells us that 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?”

So I wonder why they hadn’t recognised Jesus until he broke the bread and shared it - clearly, they knew what he looked like because verse 31 tells us that they suddenly recognised Him. So why had they not recognized Him before?

If we go back to verse 16 it says “but they were kept from recognising him” – and we wonder what kept them from recognizing Jesus? Sometimes it’s suggested that it was Jesus who kept them from recognising him in some supernatural way – but Luke doesn’t say that’s what happened.

Sometimes there’s a more mundane explanation. It was just such an unlikely thing that Jesus would choose to join them on the road. He was gone. If – and to these two it was still only an ‘if’ – Jesus was coming back, surely it would be in some dramatic way not simply joining two of his disciples as they walked along the road.

And maybe it was because they didn’t look at him. When Jesus had died, they’d lost hope. The one they thought might be the messiah was gone – and had, it seemed – failed in his mission. They may have been looking down, they may have had tears in their eyes, they may have avoided making eye contact with this stranger. They were grieving. Grieving for their teacher, grieving for what might have been.

They weren’t expecting to see Jesus. We heard in our reading from John’s gospel last week, the disciples had locked themselves away in fear of the Jewish leaders. They weren’t out looking for the resurrected Jesus, they were scared and in fear for their own lives.

It’s quite possible that Cleopas and his friend were quietly slipping out of Jerusalem to avoid the Jewish leaders too. I’m sure they would have been worried about a possible clamp down on followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

But for whatever reason, they didn’t see him.

And it’s like that for people today, too. People today are kept from seeing Jesus. And from listening to him.

We can feel insignificant. Why would Jesus bother with me? We wonder. I’m not worthy. I’ve got nothing to contribute.

And people don’t look for him. Why would you go looking for Jesus? I think this is particularly true of people in situations like ours. People in St Ives and surrounds live pretty good lives. There are exceptions of course, but we’re mostly well-off, mostly pretty comfortable. Why would they bother to worry about Jesus or what he might have to say to them.

That, of course, can run into the fear of what Jesus might say to them. What the consequences of running into Jesus might be for them. Maybe our well-off, comfortable existence in suburbia may be challenged. Or our financial decisions. Or our ethical ones.

These days of course, some people who claim to be Jesus’ followers don’t have a good reputation in society, and people will avoid getting to know Jesus, because they don’t want to be involved with people like that.

Even for us who are followers of Jesus, we can so easily be distracted from hearing what he has to say to us. Distractions are all around us, and as they present a regular challenge for us to recognise

Jesus as he speaks to us and gives inspiration and strength and the peace and joy we need to face the problems and challenges we face. The distractions themselves may not be bad things of themselves, but sometimes even good works and distract us from seeing Jesus.

In each case, with the disciples we've heard about over the last three weeks, disciples who were stricken with grief, despair, fear, sorrow, and hopelessness had their needs met when their eyes were opened and they saw the risen Jesus – the two Mary's found joy, Thomas and the other disciples in the locked room found hope and strength, and Cleopas and the other one on the road to Emmaus found renewed hope and inspiration to serve the Messiah.

And in each case, they set out to tell others the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

In the case of the Emmaus road disciples, they physically turned around. The reading began with them heading from Jerusalem to Emmaus, but after they recognised Jesus, "They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem". Remember this is at night! And remember, Jerusalem was probably a dangerous place for them. But they went anyway!

They went back to Jerusalem, where we read that "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.

They recognised him when he broke the bread. We tend to jump immediately to the last supper, and our remembrance of that in Holy Communion when we read that, but really, Jesus breaking the bread would have been a common thing during his ministry – at the end of the day, sitting down together for a meal, breaking bread and sharing it.

I like that it was in that moment that they recognised Jesus, because sometimes we recognise Jesus in the small things in life. Sometimes we recognise Jesus in the big things, but sometimes it's in the quiet moments: The sharing of fellowship. A hand on the shoulder. A cup of tea offered. A hug of comfort. A favour done. Some bread broken and shared.

When we're going through dark times in our life, it's often those small things that get us through. It's often in those small things we see Jesus.

And when we're not in dark times, we can share those small things with others. We can show Jesus to others.

My hope and my prayer for us here at St Ives Uniting is that we will continue recognise Jesus in our lives as individuals and our life together as a congregation.

And that, in our life together, we will help others come to recognise Jesus for themselves.

Amen.