

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

Was it Not Necessary? The Story of the Road to Emmaus Scott Powell

Well, hello everybody. My name is Scott and today I want to talk to you about one of my favorite stories in the New Testament. The story of the Road to Emmaus. I love the story of the Road to Emmaus because I think it is emblematic of the whole of the Christian life. It tells us about discipleship, it tells us about suffering, what it means to be let down and disappointed. It teaches us who Christ is and who he wants to be in our lives.

So, I'm going to spend a few minutes kind of taking this apart and seeing what it has to say to us. Before we do that, let's open with a quick prayer.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus, thank you for the gift of Your Word. Thank You for the gift of Your scriptures. We pray that we may study Your Word well and figure out how to apply it to our lives. Please be with all of the people who are listening and watching this. Please be with all those who are preparing through this retreat for Advent. Be in my words. Please help me to not say anything that is outside of Your Will. And we pray all these things through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now, the story of the Road to Emmaus may be something that you're familiar with. Maybe you remember hearing it at mass. Maybe you've studied it before. But regardless, I want to try to look at this with new eyes. One of the things we know is to really understand the scriptures, to get into what God has to teach us we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the original audience. The people who were taking part in these things. The people who were reading this stuff for the first time. Put ourselves in the cultural place; the cultural shoes.

Now, the story of the Road to Emmaus comes at the very end of the Gospel of Luke. It's in Luke chapter 24 and I want to pick it up in verse 13. Here's what it says:

[Luke] Chapter 24:13

“That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem.”

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

Okay, let's pause there. There's a couple things that we need to look into.

“That very day two of them were going”. What day is it? Well, if you read a couple verses before Luke points out to you that “That very day” is the first day of the week. It's Sunday. But it's not just any Sunday, it's Easter Sunday and it is THE Easter Sunday. This is the day of the Resurrection. This is one of the most interesting moments in all of Christian history because it's at this moment that Jesus has risen from the dead. The Resurrection has happened but nobody knows about it yet. They're confused. Nobody knows what's actually going on.

You remember the stories going on at the beginning of Easter Sunday. The women went to the tomb and they found that Jesus' body wasn't there and they talked to angels. But, everybody is kinda confused about everything that's going on.

So in that moment these two disciples, followers of Jesus, are going away from Jerusalem to this place called Emmaus.

Now, the first day of week. That, for the Jewish listeners, would have certain connotations. Days of the week had meaning to them. You know, the most important Jewish day of the week is the sabbath. The seventh day. The day that God rested from His work of creations. So, they were called to rest as well.

But, what about the first day of the week? What happened on the first day of the week? Well, on the first day of the week in the Jewish mindset would've evoked images of creation [from] the creation story. And what does God create on the first day of the week way back in Genesis? Well, he separates light from darkness.

Light from darkness. That's a theme that's going to run through this story. Light and dark. So, on the day of the Resurrection, the day where we think about light and darkness two disciples of Jesus are going to Emmaus which is seven miles from Jerusalem.

“And they were talking with each other about all that had happened. And while they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and he went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Luke 24:14-16

You could say that their eyes were darkened. Right? These are two people. We don't know much about them. But, they've been following Jesus. They're presumably disciples. Maybe they've given up something to follow him. Maybe

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

they've been around for a couple of years. We don't know. But something about this scene is striking. They don't recognize the Jesus who they've been following for some time. Which is very striking. So, they don't recognize him. Their eyes are closed.

And he goes and he says, it's verse 17:

“He said to them, ‘What is this conversation which you hold with each other as you walk?’ and they stood still looking sad. One of them, named Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem that doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days?’”

Now, what's the irony in that sentence? “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem that doesn't know what's happened?” The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the only one that does know what's happened! Nobody yet realized what's going on except Jesus. So, [Luke's] having some fun with us. Right?

And Jesus then kind of plays with them. It's verse 19:

“He said to them, ‘What things?’ And they say, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death and they crucified him but we had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel’”

“We had hoped” The most striking thing about that sentence is that it's in the past tense. We had hoped. We used to hope. We don't hope anymore. They had given up. They've lost hope and now they're walking away. It says,

“... And yes besides this, it is now the third day since this has happened.”

You know, in the Jewish and Roman world, three days. What's the significance of three days? Right? Well, to declare somebody legally dead, to give a death certificate the person had to have been dead for three days. The medical system wasn't what it is today and there was a chance of a mistake. There was a chance that someone came back to life or resuscitated or something. They figured after three days the person is really dead. So, at this point they realize, yeah Jesus is really dead. He ain't coming back. And so they are walking away.

That image is so striking! These two people walking away from Jerusalem. Well, what's in Jerusalem? Well, in Jerusalem are the apostles, the fledgeling Church

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

such as it is, who are struggling themselves. But you have this image of two people walking away from the Church disappointed. Two people walking away from the Church having been let down. How many people do you know in your life who have walked away from the Church because they felt let down? Or hurt? Or disappointed? Or somehow abandoned? Disappointed?

It's a fascinating scene, I know so many people like that, that the scene should kind of break our hearts. But Jesus goes to meet them. He goes to find them. It says in verse 22:

“Moreover some of our company amazed us. There were some women who went to the tomb early and they didn't find his body. They came back saying they saw a vision of angels who said that he was alive. So some of those who were with us (we know it's Peter and John) they went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see. And Jesus answered them, ‘O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe all the prophets had spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’”

What do we know about these people so far? So far we know that they are disciples. That they had hoped in Jesus. That they had followed him, maybe they gave something up for the sake of following him. They're pretty disappointed now. And they are leaving Jerusalem to go to Emmaus. Maybe they live in Emmaus or maybe they're just staying there for the Passover.

Do we know anything else about them? Well, we know one other thing. We know that one of them is named Cleopas. Who the heck is the other one? Well, it doesn't say explicitly but one of my favorite things about the Bible is that the Bible loves to interpret itself. Often times when you have a question or something confusing comes up in the Bible you can find the answer some place else in the Bible.

So, here on Easter Sunday Cleopas and someone else are walking home or walking to wherever it is they're staying. In the Gospel of John, John tells you on Good Friday (a couple days prior) at the foot of the cross watching Jesus as he's crucified there are a couple people there who John names.

We know that Mary was there, the Blessed Mother. We know that John the beloved Apostle was there. Mary Magdalene was there and there was also someone there named Mary, the wife of Cleopas. Mary, the wife of Cleopas.

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

On Good Friday there was a woman named Mary, the wife of Cleopas, at the cross and now on Sunday Cleopas is walking home with someone. Who's he walking home with? Well, it's probably his wife! Presumably this is a couple. A man and a woman. A husband and a wife. Walking away from Jerusalem having been let down by Jesus and by the Church. It is a striking image.

And Jesus calls them foolish because they are slow of heart to believe all the prophets had spoken. He says, "Was it not necessary that all these things happen?" And it says in verse 27:

"Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things that concern himself."

And we know in the teaching of the Church that everything in the Old Testament concerns Jesus. The whole New Testament is concealed in the Old. And the Old is revealed in the New. So, essentially, Jesus explains everything.

Imagine being on a walk for 7 miles (a couple hours) with Jesus able to answer any and every question you've ever had. To explain everything! He gives the best homily, the best bible study anyone has ever heard before and at the end of it their eyes are still darkened. They still don't see Him. They still don't recognize him. Until verse 28. Then it says,

"They drew near to the village in which they were going but he appeared to be going further. But they constrained him (literally in Greek it means "they held onto him" because they didn't want him to go) saying, "Stay with us, for it is now toward evening and the day is far spent." So he went in to stay with them. And when he was at table with them, he took the bread, he blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

It's not until they sit down and share the Eucharist, they sit down for the Lord's Supper. We know it's the Eucharist because these are the exact same words that Luke used earlier to describe the Last Supper. When Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them.

You know, if you noticed it, this is actually where we get the structure of the mass. Where we hear the scriptures proclaimed. We have a homily about those scriptures. And then we sit and gather round the Eucharistic table together. This is where the mass comes from.

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

But, there's something striking here. The greatest homily in the world does not open their eyes. The greatest bible study, the greatest conference in the world does not reveal to them the fullness of who Jesus is. It's not until they receive the Eucharist that they get it.

Now, imagine this. This is for all intents and purposes the end of the Bible. The end of the biblical story. We still have all of Paul's letters and the epistles and everything else. But really, those are commentary on the scriptural story. This is the end of the story of Jesus. And Acts of the Apostles will show how the Church continues to fulfill that stuff.

But the very beginning of the Bible, on the other end, you have a very distinct problem that shows up. At the beginning of the Bible you have a husband and a wife. A man and a woman who eat something and their eyes are opened. You know, Adam and Eve out of disobedience to God ate the fruit of the tree that He asked them not to eat. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the eyes are opened. To what? Well, to death, to chaos, to sin, to destruction, to everything bad in the world. Right?

And here at the other end of the story. You have another husband and a wife. Another man and a woman who eat something and their eyes are opened. Not to death and chaos and sin but to life and forgiveness and redemption. They are brought from darkness to light through the reception of the Eucharist.

You know the Fathers of the Church, some of the ancient saints, they loved digging through this passage. And they said, well wait a second, Jesus (you may have heard it said) hung on a tree. Sometimes the cross is called a tree. And they said, well if the cross is like a tree and Jesus hung on it then Jesus is like the fruit of a new tree. The fruit of the tree of life. Which a new kind of Adam and Eve eat and their eyes are opened. The problem of scripture, the problem of salvation history is solved in the same way that it began.

God is consistent. God cares for us. And the scriptures interpret themselves. The story comes full circle which is beautiful! And then these disciples go back and tell everybody what they learned. The mark of a true disciple. To go back and actually call others into discipleship. It's a great moment.

But, there's something that happens even before that. That I just want to say a word about because this for me is the most disturbing line in the passage and it's back in verse 26 when Jesus is speaking to them on the road. And he says,

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer all these things and enter into his glory?”

Was it not necessary? If you're this couple you gotta be thinking, “How did it come to this? How did we get to this point that the guy that we were following. The one that we put all of our hope in, he's hanging on a cross. He's dead!” And Jesus says no, no, no, “Was it not necessary?”. I mean, we don't have a faith where Jesus wound up on the cross thinking, “Geeze! How did I end up here? What went wrong?”. He knows exactly what he's doing but too often we believe in a kind of God who sort of a God of silver linings. Who will bring some goodness out of dark things. Cloud's silver linings. Right? We talk about that God way.

That's not the kind of God that I want to believe in. I don't want to believe in a God who just lets evil perpetuate in the world and then steps in once in awhile to bring some good out of it.

I hope that I stand before God someday at the judgment seat and He'll look at me and He'll look at my life and He'll say, “Scott, all those things that you suffered, the crosses that you carried, the baggage that you dragged around was it not necessary that you suffered those things so that I can make you into the man that I want you to be?”

All of the things that you carry around, all of those things that you've suffered, all those little crosses that you carry in your life. We don't have a God who is concerned with just wiping them away and forgetting about them. We have a God who is concerned with taking those crosses and making them glorious. Looking us in the eyes and saying, “Was it not necessary that you suffered those things? That you dealt with those issues? That you had those relationships so that I could build you into the man or woman that I want you to be after my own heart?”

This is how saints are forged. We don't know the mind of God. I don't know why God allows some things to happen and doesn't allow other things to happen. Why He allows certain evils to perpetuate themselves in the world. But I do believe in a God that is in control of all of it. Nothing escapes His sight.

Sometimes we live our lives as though God has forgotten about us. Or isn't paying attention. Or that somehow at the end of the day we don't know if good or evil is going to win. And we forget that Jesus has actually conquered evil once and for all. Whether or not the world looks like it we have to remind ourselves; no, God has

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

allowed this because He's in control. And he's going to look at me one day and He's going to say, "Was it not necessary?"

What are those things in your life that you have to come to grips with and say, "Wow! Maybe this is necessary that I suffer these things so that I can become holier. So that I can become the man or woman that God wants me to be."

How do we find those things? How do we see those things for what they are? Well, the story makes it clear. We have to receive Jesus' body and blood. We have to access the sacraments. I need to go to mass! Every day! Every Sunday at least! So that every Sunday, every week, every day my eyes can be opened once again. Because if I don't access those sacraments I'm gonna fall back into the beginning of this story. My eyes are gonna get darkened again. I'm going to lose my way. But as much as I receive Jesus. As much as I walk with him hear his word and take his body into my body my eyes can be opened every single day and that's what he wants of us. Because that's what will make our lives make sense. That's what will allow us the grace and the courage to take the next step every day and say, "God, I trust You. I trust that it's necessary that I face these things and I know that I don't have to face them alone because I know that You walk right beside me. Whether I see You or not, I know and trust that You are there."

Thanks so much everybody. Let's close with a Glory Be.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you.