

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The stranger on our way

Presented by Bob Smith

LUKE 24:13-35

Only once can I remember having openly expressed doubt about the reality of Jesus' presence in my life. It was around thirty years ago and I was at my wits end as I contemplated the seeming inevitability that I was about to lose my marriage and my family. One drizzly winter's night, I walked along Thirroul beach, trying to make sense of it all. After a while I took shelter under a rocky overhang, sat on the sand and suddenly I did something I'd once thought I never would. I blurted out to God, "*Are you really there?*"

I was a bit shocked by my outburst, but I didn't feel guilty. In fact what happened was the very opposite. I felt within myself such an overwhelming assurance that God was there that I actually began to laugh. Nothing had changed in my life, but I knew that I wasn't alone on my lonely way.

I think it was not so much doubt as bewilderment that I was feeling that night on the beach; and I suspect many of us sometimes feel the same. Even the disciples did. One of the strangest of the post-resurrection stories of Jesus is the one about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

It took place the very same day that Jesus had risen from the dead. The two disciples, one of whom was named Cleopas and who may have been the Cleopas mentioned in John's gospel who was a relative of Jesus, were walking to Emmaus from Jerusalem and were in deep dejection. Like all the disciples, their hopes and dreams had been shattered. Jesus, whom they had been convinced was the long promised Messiah, and whom they believed was destined to lead their nation to glory, had been brutally done to death.

But to add to their confusion, that very morning, some women from their group had gone to the tomb and had found it empty. Now they didn't know what to believe. They were bewildered, caught in that no-man's land between faith and disbelief. Up until a few days before they had believed completely, but all that had collapsed as they saw their Messiah die. Now they didn't know whether to believe or not. They remembered all they had seen him do and heard him say, and they wanted to believe the report they'd heard. But who had ever heard of anyone being raised from the dead?

Those two disciples are the patron saints of so many of us who also find ourselves bewildered when it comes to what we really believe about Jesus. We are the beneficiaries of two thousand years of faith; sixty or more generations of true believers have gone before us, and the faith we received was passed down to us through those generations.

Yet we are also children of the Age of Reason, the inheritors of two and half centuries of scepticism. Over that period of time we have seen attack after attack made against the Christian faith, and a gradual erosion of confidence in the Church, its beliefs, its practices and its scriptures. And the Church hasn't always helped its own cause. Time and again through its own actions it has subverted the very faith that it claims to champion. That's why I think Cleopas and his companion are the true patron saints of many of us today. We want to believe, but find ourselves bewildered; caught between the faith of our fathers and the scepticism of our brothers.

As the two disciples made their lonely way along the road to Emmaus, Luke's gospel tells us that, "*Jesus came up and walked along with them.*" However the strangest part of this whole story is that they didn't recognise him. The Bible says, "*They were kept from recognising him.*" Mark's gospel says, "*Jesus appeared to them in a different form.*"

It's hard to know what that actually means, but the gospels do record several occasions on which the disciples failed to recognise him at first: like Mary Magdalene standing, weeping outside his tomb, and Peter and his friends who were out fishing when Jesus called to them from the shore. There have been all sorts of explanations for why this may have been so; everything from the two disciples' being dazzled by the setting sun, to the appearances being merely hallucinations or visions.

However the gospels go to great lengths to insist that those appearances of the risen Christ were of a real person whose body, though no longer a mortal body like ours and not subject to the limitations of time and space, still bore the marks of the wounds he suffered for us.

But to me the true meaning of this story is that it reminds us of how, in those times of bewilderment as we go through our own dark nights of the soul, Jesus still comes to us even though we don't understand it at the time. Church history is full of such stories, like the story of Saint Martin of Tours who, as a young officer in the Roman Army, while riding through the country one winter's day, came across a half naked beggar. He dismounted and tore his expensive cloak in two, giving half of it to the beggar before riding on. That night he dreamt he saw Jesus wearing the cloak he had given away and saying, "*Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not baptised. He has clothed me.*" Martin realised he had met the Christ.

Then there is the story of a dissolute young nobleman, Francis of Assisi, also out riding along a lonely road when he came across a leper. Francis, who up until then had shared the revulsion most people had towards lepers and was desperately afraid of catching the disease, was overcome with compassion. He ran to the beggar and embraced him. Then as he rode on and looked back, there was no-one there. He too believed he had met the Christ.

Whether these stories are of the same nature as Luke's account of the two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus is open to discussion? But they do remind us of something Jesus said in his famous parable of the sheep and the goats: "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*"

The meaning is that Jesus still comes to us in those who need our compassion and help, which is why the best advice for those of us who are beset by doubt and despair is still to go out and do something for someone worse off than ourselves, and in them we may find the answer to our doubts.

I sometimes think that Jesus came to me like that. It was about thirteen years ago in Townsville. For some time I had found myself occasionally responding to insignificant irritations by being overwhelmed by feelings of utter dejection. What I didn't realise at the time was that such reactions are the classic symptoms of emotional exhaustion. I had been working too hard for too long; living on adrenaline as I faced the demands of ministry.

One afternoon I found myself descending again into that emotional black hole as I walked through the centre of Townsville. I came to a pedestrian crossing and was waiting for the lights to turn green when I noticed an elderly aboriginal man next to me. My first reaction was to want to move away from him because that very morning I'd heard a news report troubles in Townsville with aboriginal people who were drunk and disorderly.

But something inside me told me to speak to him. So I did. I smiled at him and asked him how he was. He just gave me a big smile back. Then the lights changed and I went one way and he went the other. When I had crossed to the other side of the street I looked back to see where he'd gone, but I couldn't see him. He may just have blended into the crowd, but I suddenly felt my heart fill with joy and peace, and my depression lifted. And I think that for me, in some strange way, it was a meeting with Jesus.

Well it was that and much more for those two disciples. As they walked that lonely road and talked to the stranger who had joined them, they told him why they were so dejected, how all their hopes and dreams had been shattered, and how they now didn't know what to believe. He, for his part, told them that their problem was that they *couldn't see for looking*; and he began to show them from the scriptures how it had been foretold that the Christ had to suffer these things, and how his sufferings would bring about the greatest victory of all in his rising from the dead. His words were so uplifting that they invited him to have a meal with them, and there something happened as he broke the bread, gave thanks to God and then gave it to them. Perhaps it was a memory of something they had seen a couple of years earlier, on a hillside by the Sea of Galilee, when they and five thousand hungry people had seen Jesus break five small loaves, give thanks to God and then distribute the pieces, enough to feed them all.

Whatever it was, Luke's gospel says; *"Their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight."* And as they stood there, wonderstruck, they remembered how *"their hearts burned within them while he talked with them on the road and opened the scriptures to them."* Perhaps like my heart did after meeting that old man in Townsville.

Some years ago, when Malcolm Muggeridge, one of Britain's most brilliant journalists and skeptics, was invited to make a series of television programs on the life of Christ, he was particularly drawn to the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and so, to get the feel of how it would have been, he and one of the film crew actually walked the road themselves. Something happened to that unbelieving man on the way, which he mentioned in a sermon he delivered years later in St Giles church in Edinburgh. He said, *"Nor was it a fancy that we too were joined by a third presence. And I tell you that wherever the walk, and whoever the wayfarers, there is always this third presence ready to emerge from the shadows and fall in step along the dusty, stony way."* He still comes to us unexpectedly and in many forms, but to those whose hearts are open he makes himself known again.