

## **Does It Have To Be This Way?**

**Luke 24:13-35**

**April 7, 2024**

I want you to think for a moment about an important loss that you have suffered. Maybe it is the death of a loved one. Maybe it is the breakup of a marriage. Maybe it is the failure of your health. Maybe it is the loss of a job or the collapse of a dream. Whatever it is, I know it is an unpleasant and painful thing to be asked to think about at the very beginning of a sermon on this second Sunday of Easter – a time when we are supposed to be celebrating – but I don't think we can fully experience the weight of this story until we situate ourselves in the emotion of this moment.

The story takes place late in the afternoon on that first Easter Sunday. Two people, one named Cleopas and the other whose name remains unknown, were walking from Jerusalem back to their home in a place called Emmaus. We are told that their faces were downcast. In other words, there was a heaviness in their spirit, and a sadness in their hearts. We soon come to discover the reason for that sadness.

Like so many others, these two had been in Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration, but this year there had been an unusual tone of excitement and anticipation because of Jesus.

Word about him had spread throughout the city. People were talking about the things he had said and done, and many people, including these two, had come to believe that he was the long-awaited Messiah. They were convinced he was the one who was going to set Israel free.

And just so we are clear, that could only mean one thing: He was the One who was going to run the Romans out of town and make Israel a strong and free nation once again for the first time in hundreds of years. He was the One who would finally stick to these pagan overlords who were squeezing the life out of God's people. Everybody knew that is what the Messiah would do.

And that is why the events of that Friday had been so heartbreakingly tragic. When Jesus was drug up a hill and nailed to a cross, it was a clear sign that all those hopes had been misplaced. No true Messiah would go down in defeat like that. It would have been one thing if Jesus had died on the battlefield making a heroic stand against the onslaught of Israel's pagan enemies. But to die on a cross? That was the most humiliating form of punishment the Romans could conceive. It was a torturous way of reminding everybody who was really in charge – and clearly it wasn't Jesus.

So, Cleopas and his partner were on their way back home, their spirits crushed. So much for the hopes of freedom and

redemption. Now, they were just going to have to get used to the fact that this is way life would always be.

As they walked along, their steps heavy with disappointment, a stranger wanders up alongside them and works his way into their conversation. Perhaps when your heart is breaking you are willing to talk to anybody who will genuinely listen, so the two begin telling this stranger about everything that has happened – about their hopes and about the collapse of those hopes.

And that is when the story takes an unlikely turn. As readers of the story, you and I already know what Cleopas and his partner don't – at least not yet. This isn't just any stranger. This is Jesus – the same Jesus in whom they had placed their hopes and who they had seen die. But rather than immediately revealing himself, Jesus instead uses this as a teaching moment. He took them back to the Hebrew Scriptures and began to show them how the events of those last few days were not a sign of failure; they were the fulfillment of what the Scriptures had always said was supposed to happen. Up until this moment, few, if any humans, had ever stopped to consider the possibility that this was how things were supposed to go, but the suffering and death of the Messiah had always been at the heart of God's plan. If you ask me,

the climax of this story comes in verse 26, when the still as yet unrecognized Jesus says to them, “*Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?*” From there he went on point out how the Scripture had always pointed in this direction.

And he didn’t just point out one or two verses here and there. Verse 27 says he started with Moses and went all the way through the prophets. Now, the Hebrew Scriptures that our Jewish neighbors use are organized a little differently than our Old Testament, but it is the same collection of books. If you look in your Old Testament you will see that it begins with the books of and about Moses, and it goes all the way through the prophets. In other words, Jesus showed them how the entire Old Testament was preparing us for the things that happened from Friday to Sunday in Jerusalem. It was the fulfillment of God’s divine plan. As crazy as it sounded, it had always been God’s plan, not to save his people from suffering, but to save them *through* suffering. In other word, it had to be this way.

But why? Why did God have to choose this way, this painful, bloody way to bring about the redemption of his people? Well, to answer that, Jesus took Cleopas and his partner all the way from Genesis to Malachi, but I doubt you will be willing to hang around long enough for me to do the same this morning, so let us

consider a few summary statements. Taken as a whole, the Scriptures point us to at least three reasons why the suffering of Christ was necessary. Let's briefly consider each one.

**First, and most basically, Christ had to suffer to atone for the fullness of human sin.** This is the high price that our disobedience has required. Go back with me for a moment to Genesis 3, which tells of the fall of humanity into sin. In the last verse of Genesis 2, we read that Adam and Eve were both naked, and they felt no shame. It is a picture of pure innocence. Nothing to fear, nothing to dread, nothing to hide from – in themselves or in the world around them. This is a picture of God's creation at peace with itself and with its creator. But when we get to Genesis 3, all of that changes. After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened and they recognized their nakedness and they immediately sewed some fig leaves together to hastily cover themselves. Now, there is shame and embarrassment and guilt. This is the disrupting and corrupting power of sin. Our innocence is destroyed before God and before each other.

And a few verses later we come to see just how costly that will be. After God confronts Adam and Eve, **Genesis 3:21 says, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."** Notice what has happened. God has provided a

more appropriate means of covering for their shame, but it is a garment of skin, not leaves. That means an animal has had to die to make their clothing. For the first time, blood is shed to cover human sin, and that sets the pattern for everything that will follow. The sacrificial system that is laid out in the book of Leviticus makes it painfully clear that our disobedience and rebellion comes at the cost of blood. Sacrifice and suffering is woven into the fabric of our corrupted and fallen world. That's why **Hebrews 9:22** tells us *“the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”*

Of course, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus was willing to offer himself up as that sacrifice. He was willing to be the perfect and complete atonement, once, for all. But there is no getting to that good news apart from the cross. Jesus had to show Cleopas, and his partner, and us that there is no salvation apart from his suffering. It had to be this way.

That leads to the second summary statement we can make. **The suffering of Christ was necessary to reveal the depth of God's love.** At least among those who believe that God exists, I don't know anyone, Christian or otherwise, who objects to the idea that God is love. The Bible even says as much **in 1 John 4:16 – “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them.”** But

what kind of love are we talking about? Given the confused and sometimes generic way we use the word love, we could twist that statement around to mean almost anything we want it to. But the story of Easter won't let us do that. The story of a God who comes to the earth in human skin and allows himself to be nailed to the cross is the story of a God who loves in a very specific way. This is a God whose love is not soft and gentle, but fierce and jealous. This is a God who will not and cannot waiver from his demand for righteousness and holiness, and yet at the same time is a God who is so committed to having us for himself, that he will send his own son to die in our place. This is a demanding, costly, yet unwavering love.

Romans 5:6-8 takes us to the heart of that love. The Apostle Paul writes, *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Cleopas and his partner wouldn't have necessarily been surprised to hear the claim that God loved them. God had made his love for Israel crystal clear in all that he had for them to make them into a nation in the first place. But to hear that their own God

would knowingly and willingly die in their place – that was a love they could have never imagined. Nor could we if it weren't for the cross and the empty grave. We are so quick to turn the impulse for love into a self-serving emotion, but the love God, revealed on the cross, points us in a completely different direction. That is why the Scriptures made clear that it had to be this way.

Which brings us to the third and final summary statement – and to understand this one we have to pay attention to the almost comedic irony of this story. Let's not overlook the fact that the one teaching these lessons to Cleopas and his partner – these lessons about the necessity of the suffering of the Messiah – the one teaching those lessons is the very One who endured those sufferings. The One who died on the cross is the One telling them what it means. The One who died is the One who was resurrected, which brings us to the best news of all. **The suffering of Christ transforms our sorrow into joy!** The irony of the cross is that God takes what was supposed to be Jesus' greatest moment of defeat and turns it into our greatest moment of victory. God takes the absolute worst thing, the greatest evil, this world could throw at him and flips it upside down to make it the best news we could ever imagine. The suffering of Christ transforms our sorrow into joy. There is a straight line from the cross to an empty grave.



I began this morning by asking you to think about a loss you have suffered, and I imagine that everyone of us could immediately think of something. To live in this world is to live with loss, heartbreak, disappointment, and pain. The Bible makes no effort to hide that truth from us. But the Bible also teaches this strange truth: God does not save us from suffering; he saves us through suffering. It is by going through the crucible of pain that he leads us into new life, because he promises us that the worst thing this world can do to us is not the last thing. For Jesus himself has entered into our suffering. He has taken that suffering into himself, and because of what he has endured, he is already transforming that sorrow into joy. And for those who place their hope in him, one day that joy will fill all things. **2 Corinthians 4:16-17** tells us, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”*

Were it not for what happened from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, we would not have that hope. That’s why it had to be this way.

At the beginning our story, Cleopas and his friend could not see that, but by the end of the story they did. And the moment of insight came as they gathered at the table. When they broke

bread with this stranger, they realized he was no stranger at all; he was the risen Christ. The way Luke has told this story it is unmistakable that he wants us to see the connection to the meal we are about to share. As we come together by faith to share the bread and drink the cup of our Lord's supper, may we come to recognize the presence of Jesus, who has been with us in our struggle, and who longs to transform our sorrow in joy.