

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 26 April 2020

God of life, your Spirit raise Jesus from dead. Your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to Christ and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that you will send your Spirit now to give us deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation for the Easter gospel. Amen.

1 Peter 1: 17-23; Luke 24:13-35

The pilgrim's progress on the Way

Recently one of my friends sent me a link to watch an animation movie, titled '*The Pilgrim's Progress*.' As you may presume, it was based on the book written by John Bunyan. While imprisoned between 1660 to 1672, he wrote "*The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which is to Come*.' As the title suggests, the main focus is about 'the progress' of one pilgrim, namely *Christian's* journey to the Celestial City. *Christian* has traits that people may commonly have. Sometimes he seems to be wise, but soon he reveals his foolishness. Other time, *Christian* seems brave enough to fight against dragons while he hesitates over crossing the deep water to reach the Celestial City. Even so, he is moving towards the Celestial City step by step with the help of others. This story quite resembles another story in Luke 24:13-35, titled Walk to Emmaus. There is one big difference, though. In *the Pilgrim's Progress*, the journey from the city of Destruction to the Celestial City was a long one-way travel. Whenever *Christian* gets help, the helpers make it sure that he should travel straight to the Celestial City. In Luke, a pivotal moment unfolds between Emmaus and Jerusalem, which divides their journey before and after. That is, the breaking of the bread by the risen Lord is the heart of Christianity. But it also makes Christianity unique from other religions. We'll find it out more in this order – Walk to Emmaus, the breaking of the bread and walk back to the Way.

Walk to Emmaus

Under the title of 'Walk to Emmaus,'¹ the story begins with two people who are walking towards a village called Emmaus. According to Josephus – a Jewish historian around 93 and 94 AD, Emmaus is a village 60 stadia (7½ geographical miles) in a north-western direction from Jerusalem. In Scripture, we often read this kind of road stories. For example, a road is the narrative setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan. A road leads the prodigal back home to his father. Jesus sets his eyes toward Jerusalem in Luke 9:51 and travels there until 19:28. In the Book of Acts, Paul encounters the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus. Jesus in his ministry was often on the road. In this case – Walk to Emmaus, however, is slightly different from the previous examples. The disciples are moving away from Jerusalem which was once the centre of the living hope for Messiah of Israel.

The two are walking and discussing. As Jesus is approaching them, their eyes are **kept from recognizing** him (24:16).² As we have talked previous Sundays, people are not able to recognize the risen Christ by merely seeing him unless they get aided by Christ. In this case, they are so engrossed in conversation. The recent tragic event in Jerusalem – the crucifixion of Jesus has made them despair. They don't have any room to pay attention to a stranger. As they walk towards Emmaus, the farther they are from Jerusalem so is the hope for salvation behind. Now the stranger joins them. Together they walk towards Emmaus while conversing. This stranger doesn't seem to know about what happened in Jerusalem. When the news is retold to him, the stranger even says this: the Messiah should suffer those things and then enter into his glory. And he interprets to them the things about Messiah in all the scriptures.³

¹ Ἐμμαοῦς] in Josephus, *Bell.* vii. 6. 6. Ἐμμαοῦς, is a village, also according to Josephus 60 stadia (7½ geographical miles) in a north-western direction from Jerusalem.

² Luke 24:16 οἱ δὲ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτῶν ἐκρατοῦντο τοῦ μὴ ἐπιγνῶναι αὐτόν.

³ Luke 24:25-27

The Breaking of the Bread

As they come near the village, an unexpected thing unfolds. Jesus seems to walk ahead of them as if he is going on (v.28). But they urge him to stay with them strongly. So he went in with them (v.29). But as soon as the table is set, Jesus upends the expected social roles. He becomes the host by blessing the bread and sharing it. Eating is important in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is accused early in the Gospel of being a glutton and a drunkard (7:34). Even worse, he eats with all the wrong people. Eating with the outcast is a radical act even today. It breaks down cultural boundaries. But in this context, it is not just an ordinary meal, but the proclamation of God's shalom in which everything previously alienated and separated from God is reconciled. As the host of the table, he breaks the bread, blesses it, and shares it with his disciples. The humble table where Christ is invited to sit becomes a sacred place of revelation. Luke reports that it is when their eyes are open, and they recognize him. Then Jesus vanishes. But why is it so important?

First, the host of this table is Christ – the risen Lord who offers food to his disciples. In traditional religious settings regardless of cultures and religions, it is people who prepare a table/an altar to offer sacrifices to their gods. In doing so, they appease them. In exchange, they would get what they want, such as safety, success, or prosperity to name a few. Even in the Old Testament, many offerings and altars had to be set up by people whenever their sins had to be pardoned.

In Emmaus, the table is hosted by the risen Lord – the opposite direction from the usual religious practices. They eat bread and it enables them to be sent out to the community which they have left previously. They are commissioned by the risen Lord to deliver the good news of resurrection. We can see similar example in John 21:12. In the story, Jesus invites the disciples to the breakfast that he prepares for them. He says to them, "Come and have breakfast." John reports that none of the disciples dares to ask him, "Who are you?" because they know it is the Lord.⁴ The Emmaus story ends with the two men going to Jerusalem to report what had happened. This can be called as the pilgrim's progress on the Way!

Walk back to the Way

We began this story of *Walk to Emmaus* with *the Pilgrim's Progress*. There are similarities and differences between them. In *the Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian's journey to the Celestial City is one way trip. During the journey, Christian cannot think of any other things but only move forward. He can invite his wife Christiana and children to the Celestial City only after he gets the Celestial City. It becomes the second part of the book.

In *Walk to Emmaus*, Jesus' breaking the bread becomes the pivotal moment for the disciples. Their journey will not finish until they return to the community with the good news. We may say that it is a round trip. This trip will not complete until they finish their mission by returning to the community. It shows the way of life that believers live here and now.

Presently we are living in a very strange time because of COVID 19. Some scholars, scientists and economists even predict that the world will not be the same as before. What we learn from Luke and 1 Peter is that no matter what will happen in near future, the God given mission – the extension of the Lord's table will be continued as it is not planned by people, but God. Although we are living in this uncertain time, it is comfort to know that God's thoughts are not human thoughts, nor are human ways God's ways. Also God's ways are higher than human ways.⁵ We Easter people are entitled to extend the Lord's table to the community near and far by tending people's spiritual and physical needs. Setting up a simple table in the name of Jesus Christ is always a starting point from which we come from and to which we'll always return continually. In this way, love abounds and love will cover the multitude of sins of the world.⁶ For this, we are called. Amen.

⁴ John 21:12

⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9

⁶ 1 Peter 4:8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.