

"The Heart of Easter"

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Easter Sunday

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(Luke 24:13-35)

Preliminary Remarks.

Introduction.

Last Tuesday, Karl Pandorf of our church staff, underwent his fourth or fifth heart surgery procedure in the last few years. (Karl gave me permission to share this with you, and I'd also like to ask for your prayers for Karl as he recovers.) The first surgery Karl which had was back in 2013, and he had open heart surgery. They cut open his chest, and he had his mitral valve repaired so it could work properly. This time they only replaced the leads into a pacemaker that the surgeons put in another time before. It's absolutely remarkable what they can do nowadays in repairing a damaged heart.

I'm happy to report that the surgery went well, and Karl is now home and on his way to recovery. In fact he was back at the church working on Friday! And I think he's sitting out in the congregation here today at the 11 o'clock service! Now pray for Karl's wife Debbie. When I saw Karl in the hospital, he told me that he can't raise his left arm above his shoulder, and he also can't lift anything over 8 pounds for 8 weeks. So much for Karl helping with the housework on Easter. "Sorry, honey. Doctor's orders. I'd love to help, but I can't lift a thing!"

This morning we read of a moment when two disciples had some heart surgery of their own, but this surgery was a different sort. It was heart surgery of a *spiritual kind*, and it's one of the immortal stories in the New Testament. Our passage tells us of two people who were walking to their home from Jerusalem in dejection and frustration but whose sadness was suddenly transformed into life-changing joy! It reveals the ability of Jesus to make sense of things in the midst of difficult times in life, and it tells of the awesome wonder of the resurrection power of Christ.

Up to this point, Luke has reported the empty tomb, the message of the two men in dazzling robes, and Peter's visit to the tomb. Luke doesn't report many of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, but he records this one because these two disciples were so representative of the others. Though the resurrection had already taken place, the only thing they knew was pain and perplexity.

Picture the scene in your mind. As they're walking on the road to Emmaus, a village about 7 miles from Jerusalem, Cleopas and his companion (who some speculate may have been his wife) talk to each other about all the things that had taken place – Jesus' crucifixion and the report of some women of the tomb they found empty. Suddenly, they hear footsteps behind them, and a lone figure, a stranger to them, walks up alongside and engages them in conversation.

In the course of the passage, three kinds of hearts are described. Let's look at each of them.

I. The Sad Heart (13-24).

There are several things in our text that indicate these two people were sad. First, their appearance revealed it. "*And they stood still looking sad...*" (17). Second, you can hear sadness in their words of frustration: "*Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days!?*" (18). Third, listen to their despair: "*We had hoped that*

He was the one to redeem Israel" (21). And finally, notice how they heard everything as bad news. "Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since all this happened" (21).

The significance of this is that here we see a perfect example of the kind of spiritual perplexity that every follower of Christ experiences at one time or another in the course of life. In the midst of spiritual confusion, sadness and sometimes even depression sets in which is accompanied by the feeling that God has somehow turned against us.

Last week I shared with you the quote by C.S. Lewis in his book *A Grief Observed* about his pain and the feeling of abandonment he expressed after the death of his wife. When he wrote that book, Lewis had been a follower of Christ for many years, and he was one of the leading intellectual voices for Christianity in the world. Just because you know Christ and you're well along on your journey of faith doesn't exempt you from having moments of doubt, pain and deep sadness.

Yesterday I was talking with Nathan Hatch of our congregation, and we discussed this passage. He told me that several years ago he heard British author and scholar J.I. Packer give a wonderful sermon on Luke 24. In that sermon Packer said that the source of the disciples' sadness was because the one thing they thought God had given them, the one thing on which they hung their hope, was the one thing God snatched away – Jesus their Messiah. And that loss led to their disappointment.

In his sermon Packer also related the story of a missionary who married late in life. She was so happy, and she thought, "Good things come to those who wait." But then tragically the missionary's husband died only a few months after they got married. Here this woman thought God had provided this wonderful gift in the later years of her life only to have her husband snatched away. The one thing God provided and meant so much to her was the one thing that was taken away. Have you ever had an experience like that?

All of us know of times of disappointment and the feeling of abandonment, just like these disciples did. We wonder, "How could I have been wrong? How could I have been so mistaken? Where are you God? What in the world are you doing?" When this happens we experience sadness of heart.

II. The Slow Heart.

"[Jesus] said to them, 'How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Lk. 24:25-27).

Jesus analyzed the problem for these two believers, and He pointed out that their sadness of heart was actually the result of their slowness of heart. Slowness of heart has two causes.

A. Allowing the circumstances of life to control you. These disciples allowed the events of the preceding days to shatter their faith and hope in the Lord. Even after the reports of some of the other disciples, they remained defeated and doubted the authenticity of the information. They weren't able to rise above their circumstances and trust in God.

People who put their faith in Christ can be like Noah's Ark. When the water of trouble surrounded the vessel, the ark rose and floated above the destruction below. When Peter kept his eyes fixed upon Jesus, he was able to rise above the turbulent wind and the waves and walk on water. It is possible in the Christian life to have the ability to rise above your circumstances. We can have hope, because we know that all is not as it appears. God is sovereign, and we've got to trust that He is at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure! And God always has another move He can make.

If you're in the middle of a difficult time right now, perhaps you can make Psalm 71 your prayer: *"In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn you ear to me and save me. Be my rock and refuge to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress."*

B. A basic failure to apply the Scriptures. *"How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken..." "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself."* Notice the word "all" that is used three times in this passage. Jesus knew the whole counsel of God. The best way to combat spiritual depression is to study the Scriptures and apply them to your life. Isn't that what Jesus did when He was tempted in the wilderness in Matthew 4. To the three temptations of Satan, Jesus responded, *"It is written...it is written...it is written."* And when Satan quoted Scripture himself as a part of the second temptation, Jesus responded, *"It is also written..."* He knew the whole counsel of God. A failure to apply the Scriptures to your life is a chief cause of slowness of heart in our lives today.

You and I need to spend time studying the Bible regularly if we're going to apply the truths of Scripture to our daily lives. Sadly, it remains for many Christians an underutilized and untapped resource to combat the spiritual sadness and slowness of heart we often experience.

III. The Burning Heart (28-35).

"When He was at the table with them, [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures?' They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem."

How did these disciples experienced the burning heart? Look at vv. 17,18. First, Jesus asked them questions, and He got them to talk about their lives and their disappointment which in turn made them receptive to what He had to say. Then Jesus explained the Scriptures to them (27,32). He took them over Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, and He showed them that the Christ was supposed to die for the sins of the world and then be raised to glory. What had taken place in Jerusalem was no accident. Jesus wasn't a victim. No. The God of history was a work in all of this, and it was foretold through the prophets in the Bible long ago.

Finally, Jesus revealed Himself in the breaking of the bread (29-31). Perhaps it brought a flashback to their minds of the Last Supper when Jesus broke the bread and gave it to His disciples and said, *"Take eat, this is my Body which is broken for you."* It's interesting to note that the Lord didn't force Himself on these disciples. Rather, He waited for their invitation. Their receptivity allowed Jesus to do a mighty work in their lives that day, *"and their eyes were opened."*

Last weekend Corey Widmer, who's the senior pastor of Third Presbyterian Church in Richmond, spoke at our men's retreat. And on the retreat he gave three powerful messages about spiritual transformation involving three men in the Old Testament – Moses, Jacob, and Jonah. In his talks one of the things Corey pointed out is that there's a difference between a *transactional experience* with God and a *transformational experience* with the Lord.

Corey explained that historically much of evangelical Christianity has approached developing a relationship with God like a spiritual transaction in which we give God something in exchange for what He gives to us. For example, we pray a prayer and give our lives to Christ, and in exchange we receive eternal life and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We get our ticket to heaven punched, and we avoid the eternal punishment of hell. The transaction is a great deal, so we take advantage of the wonderful offer.

But do you see how different that is from a transformational relationship with God? Pursuing a life in Christ isn't so much about getting your ticket punched to go to heaven as it is getting to know and falling in love with the Person of Jesus Christ. It's a dynamic day-by-day walk with the living God of the universe through the Person of Jesus Christ in the power of His Holy Spirit. And when you cultivate a deepening relationship with the Lord, it begins to impact the affections of your heart which results in a profound change in your life.

Augustine was the most influential theologian of the first 1000 years of the church. He shaped the Western Church's thinking on salvation, sin, the Trinity, the role of the state, sex, and just about everything else. Augustine said that the Christian faith isn't so much about what you *know* and what you *believe* as it is about what you *love*. It involves the affections of your heart.

Earlier I mentioned J.I. Packer. Many years ago he wrote a wonderful book entitled *Knowing God*. And in that book Packer explained how there is a difference between knowing *about* Jesus and knowing Him *personally*. It's like the difference between knowing a lot of information *about* the Alps in Switzerland, and studying the geography and typography of that great mountain range. But the personal knowledge you can only gain and experience from actually hiking in the Alps and climbing those mountains yourself is a completely different knowing.

These disciples developed a personal knowledge of God in which they experienced a burning heart of love for Jesus, and it changed everything for them. Their sadness was turned into joy, their doubt was turned into faith, and their lives of dejection were transformed into a joyful sharing of their faith. Even though it was late, they made the whole journey of seven miles back to Jerusalem, and they told all their friends the good news about the resurrection of Christ.

This passage reminds us that in the midst of the struggles we have in life, we can also experience the burning heart. Jesus met these disciples when they were at their lowest, and he met them in the ordinary activity of life in sharing a meal. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus said, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*" Do you have that kind of an intimate relationship with Jesus? Have you experienced transformational power of Christ and a burning heart of love for the Lord like the two disciples did?

Blaise Pascal was a great physicist and philosopher in France who lived in the 1600s. He was also a brilliant mathematician and inventor. Over the course of his life he became more and more fascinated with the spiritual side of things in all his discoveries, and one night he experienced a burning heart which was a transformational experience that would change the brilliant scientist forever.

It was November 23, 1654. He was 31 years old. For two hours, from about 10:30 PM until 12:30 AM, he experienced a kind of spiritual inferno, and he wrote about the experience on a piece of a paper which he had sewn into the lining of his coat to keep near his heart. Here's what Pascal wrote about that night.

"FIRE! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God, Thy God and your God, Thy God shall be my God. The world forgotten, and everything except God. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy!"

Have you ever had an experience of the burning heart like that? Has God ever met you in a personal way like this? I'm not saying that Pascal's experience should be normative for every Christian. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the scientist, and not everyone has this kind of mystical experience with God. But I am saying that all of us could use a little more

passion for Christ, and Easter should get us all fired up about our faith. What is the condition of your heart today?

Conclusion.

I began my sermon talking about Karl Pandorf and his open-heart surgery. When Karl first went to see Dr. Sanjay Gandhi of our congregation, who is a cardiologist, Karl knew from talking with other doctors earlier in his life that eventually he was going to need to get a pacemaker. But he figured it was going to be a while before that would have to happen. However, when Karl met with Sanjay the doctor ran some tests to find out how Karl's heart was doing. That's when Sanjay discovered that Karl actually had a problem with one of the valves in his heart, and it was completely blocked.

Sanjay said, "We're going to need to take care of this problem." Karl thought about all he had going on at the church, and he was trying to figure out what projects needed to be finished before he could take some time off for surgery. So Karl asked, "Well, when do you think we ought to schedule this procedure?" Sanjay said, "You don't understand, Karl. You're going to the hospital right now!" And Karl did. They did the surgery the next day.

Karl couldn't put off the heart surgery he needed then, and you can't put off the spiritual heart surgery God wants to do with you now. Don't leave here today without settling the matter with Christ. Talk to Him about the state of your heart, and make Him the object of your affection. Easter is the perfect time to encounter Jesus Christ for the first time, or perhaps in brand new way. May your heart burn within you as you follow Jesus, the hinge of history, this Easter morning.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.