

## Encounters with Jesus VI - Cleopas

His was a death much like any other. It was time standing still, but careening so fast that it was all I could do to brace myself and hold on. It was pure disbelief, thinking that what I heard and saw could not be true. It was horror and despondency. It was recurring pictures in my mind of his brutal death on that despicable cross. It was the end of life as I knew it.

And yet it was more than that, too, because it was the death of everything I'd hoped for myself, my family, and my people. I believed, I truly believed, that he was the hope of Israel, the one we were waiting for. When he sent me and almost 100 others out to bear witness and tell of the coming of the kingdom of God, we saw healing and miracles and demons vanquished. After that, I had a nearly tangible hope that everything we'd been waiting for and looking for was finally here.

So when he died, all those dreams died too. For the first two days, I sat waiting with his other followers, stunned. I don't even know what we were waiting for. Maybe to wake up from the nightmare and have everything we hoped for come true. No... I think we would have settled for everything we remembered about Jesus. We sought comfort, asked each other questions, and wept together. We just could not understand—he was the one we'd called Messiah, the Son of God. We had worshiped him and given our entire lives to him. And he had let us. Why did he let us do that if this was to be the end? So we sat in disbelief and tried to come to terms with what had happened.

Finally, the intensity of our shared grief became too much for me. I just wanted to leave the questions and uncertainty behind and go home to Emmaus. But as I prepared to leave, the strangest rumors started traveling around the group. Some women had visited Jesus's tomb to prepare his body for permanent burial, and his body was gone! What could that mean?

So as I walked home with a friend, another follower of Jesus, we couldn't escape the questions. As much as I wanted to forget, to pretend that it wasn't true, I couldn't help myself. I had to talk about it. So we talked about the miracles we'd seen—the water being turned into wine, the man born blind who gained his sight, even the man Jesus raised from the dead. We discussed Jesus's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, just days before his death, where people were worshiping him in welcome. We talked about Judas and how he betrayed Jesus to the high priests. And we talked about Jesus's disappearing body.

As we walked on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a man approached us from behind. He asked us, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"†

We stopped abruptly, and just stared at him. How could he not know what had happened? I said, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"†

"What things?" he asked.†

"About Jesus of Nazareth," I replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but

they did not see Jesus.”†

Then the man said, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”†

And then he explained to us the story of God, like I’d never heard it explained before. He started with mankind’s devastating rebellion in the garden, where people first chose to do exactly what God told us not to. He showed us how that rebellion ruined all the important relationships in life—how it hurt our relationships with God, with each other, with our ability to know ourselves, even with our ability to take care of the land and resources we’d been given. And he told us of God’s great plan, starting with his promise to Abraham, that the world would be rescued and reconciled to God. He spoke with disappointment about the people of Israel, and how the prophets were sent to call them always back to repentance and humility to walk with God, and how it was always his plan to send Messiah through Israel—not just to save Israel from oppression by other nations, but to heal and restore all of our broken relationships. He talked about the Messiah, and how the Messiah was the rightful king of Israel—king of their hearts as well as their nation.

Even then, as he spoke with insight and wisdom, we didn’t recognize him. He was with us for the rest of the journey home, and when we arrived, we begged him to stay with us. We didn’t think it was safe for him to travel any further that night. So he agreed.

And we sat together and ate. He blessed the food and he blessed us, and then he broke the bread and handed it around the table. In that moment, our eyes were opened, and we understood—the man was Jesus! And just as quickly, he disappeared from our sight.

We could barely believe our own eyes, but we knew that something strange and wonderful had happened. So we rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the rest of the disciples. And when we arrived, Peter told a similar story. He had seen Jesus too! So we settled in to share all that we experienced with Jesus and all he had explained to us.

As we were still sharing and discussing what it all meant, Jesus appeared to us all! Some of the people gathered were very surprised and frightened, thinking he must be a ghost. But Jesus said, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”† And he showed us his hands and feet.

I heard gasps of disbelief, but the look on everyone’s face was more a mixture of joy and surprise. We couldn’t quite believe that it was true, but how could it not be? He stood right there in front of us!

Then he asked for something to eat, and someone gave him some boiled fish. Every last person in that room watched, holding his breath, as Jesus ate it. While he had our attention, he said, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”†

And just like that, he invited us to submit to his kingship and join his mission in restoring the relationships of the world. He called us his witnesses, and told us that we would be preaching about repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning right

here in Jerusalem.

And I began to hope again. I began to hope that what I believed about Jesus was actually true—that he was the Messiah, sent from God to redeem Israel. But I also began to understand that that was so much bigger and more important than our political freedom. Jesus wanted to make us free on the inside. He wanted to free us from our need to be selfish and prideful and envious and hateful. He wanted to set us free to make him king in our lives and love God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. That’s what he was calling us to.

So we stayed in the city and waited. A group of Jesus’s disciples watched as he was taken up into heaven in the little town of Bethany. And a little more than a week later, on the feast day of Pentecost, where we celebrated the day that God gave the law to Moses, we were gathered together. And all of a sudden, there was the sound of a great rushing wind, and what appeared to be tongues of fire rested above all of our heads. And we began speaking and sharing the good news about Jesus with all of those around us. And a miraculous thing happened—although there were Jews of many countries there, speaking all kinds of languages, when someone started to tell a story about Jesus, everyone understood, no matter what their language.

And that was the day, the day that the Holy Spirit came to fill us and empower us to speak about Jesus and to live for him, that we truly became the witnesses for Jesus that we were meant to be. Since that time, our community has had its ups and downs. Many went out from Jerusalem and went to tell others about Jesus and about all the things that he said and did. Those of us who stayed in Jerusalem lived in community, sharing meals and sharing property and worshipping together. We continue to learn what it means to every day lay down what we want for ourselves and invite Jesus to lead and transform us.

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† Quotations taken from Luke 24.

Cleopas’s story can be found in Luke 10, Luke 24, and Acts 1. The portions that are not quoted from the Bible are a fictionalized account based on the Bible and commentaries that interpret and explain this story.

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## Discussion Questions

- What did you notice about this story?
- What did you wonder about?
  
- Why do you think Jesus's death was so devastating to Cleopas?
- What do you think he was thinking about his future as he walked home to Emmaus?
- What possible explanations do you think he came up with for where Jesus's body was?
  
- Why do you think he didn't recognize Jesus as he walked along?
- What would it have been like to see Jesus alive after he had so clearly died?
- What do you think that told them about Jesus's power over death, over sin, and over brokenness?
- What kind of brokenness have you seen in the world?
  
- Why do you think God wanted to rescue people from this type of brokenness?
- Why do you think it took him so long to send Jesus to rescue us?
- Why do you think it took Jesus dying to rescue us?
  
- What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit?
- How do you think the Spirit helps Jesus's followers today?
  
- How do you think God is working to restore the brokenness of the world today?

How is Jesus inviting you to be a part of his plan to restore and reconcile the relationships of the world?