

APRIL 24, 2011

**EASTERTIDE COMMENTARY:
ON THE ROAD AGAIN,
FOR THE FIRST TIME**

**THEME: EASTER AS A WAY OF LIFE,
NOT ETERNAL LIFE**

[For context it will be extremely helpful to be familiar with the designated Common Lectionary Text found at the end of this commentary]

Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ... When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ... They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

University of Cambridge science professor, Colin Humphreys, seems to be a man with too much time on his hands. Based on exhaustive research and careful calculations of biblical, historical and astronomical data, he's come to the conclusion the last supper Jesus enjoyed with his disciples before his crucifixion was (are you ready for this?) on a Wednesday, not a Thursday!

Apparently, he's afraid some folks have long been troubled by the inconsistency between the three synoptic gospels, which assert the last supper occurred on the start of the Jewish Passover; while John says it took place before Passover. "Many biblical scholars say that, for this reason, you can't trust the Gospels at all," he says. "But if we use science and the Gospels hand in hand, we can actually prove that there was no contradiction."

So, in his new book, *"The Mystery of the Last Supper,"* he explains there were two different calendars in use; an old Jewish calendar, and the other the more common lunar calendar. Reconciling the two somehow by some complicated calculations I do not presume to understand puts the Passover meal -- and the Last Supper -- on a Wednesday.

This not only conveniently keeps that famous dining experience neatly tied to the messianic fulfillment of Jesus being the new Passover's sacrificial meal; it also helps explain how such a large number of events took place between the supper, the garden, the arrest, the trial (you know how backed up the court system can get), the flogging, the one-man parade to Golgotha, and the crucifixion.

Prof. Humphreys also believes a date could therefore be ascribed to Easter in our modern solar calendar, and working on the basis that the crucifixion took place on April 3, Easter Day would always be on April 5. So much for the long-standing and totally non-theological method of finding the first Sunday, following the first full moon of the spring equinox.

With all due respect to Prof. Humphreys, I'd say trying to resolve inconsistencies in the Bible by scientific methodology is not only an impossible task, but unnecessary, irrelevant and counter-productive, as well. It reduces what is true (or not "true") about these stories to what is verifiable to factual and empirical evidence.

I'd suggest whether Jesus' death happened on April 3rd -- or his birth occurred on December 25th, or on any of the other 364 days of the year, for that

matter -- is of little consequence. The fact that God has revealed a way of life in the one known as Jesus of Nazareth is the point.

Likewise, as important as table fellowship seems to have been to Jesus and his followers, whether Jesus last dined with his disciples on a Wednesday or a Thursday is not a deal breaker to this believer.

Moreover, I'm not sure what Prof. Humphreys would do with the Emmaus story and a post-Easter Jesus who is presumably present in some experiential way *every* time two or more are gathered in his name and bread is broken.

Whether Jesus last dined with his disciples on a Wednesday or a Thursday is not a deal breaker to this believer. Moreover, I'm not sure what Prof. Humphreys would do with ... a post-Easter Jesus who is presumably present in some experiential way every time two or more are gathered in his name and bread is broken.

The message of Easter is that the tomb is empty, and resurrection is about something *more* than resuscitation of what was once and is no more; it is about something *other* than the reconstitution of a corpse. The flesh and bone and blood of Jesus are dead and gone. Easter and resurrection are not about the immortality of what is, in fact, mortal. In one gospel tradition, the absence of that old Jesus is evidenced by the angel's simple words, "He's not here."

In another of the gospel versions Mary sees no resemblance in a risen Lord to the "earthly" Jesus, when she mistakes the former for a gardener. In addition to whatever resurrection is *not*, something else is clearly going on.

And finally, in Luke's telling of the tale, this fact is made even more evident later the same day, when those two disheartened followers of Jesus are taking that trek on foot from Jerusalem to the sleepy village of Emmaus. They are so downcast they cannot even lift their eyes to see a new day that has dawned.

Simply put, Luke's early community of believers assigns a post-Easter Jesus the task of retrospectively interpreting for would-be believers how the ancient messianic prediction and promise the prophets had foretold had, in fact, been fulfilled in this new reality that requires a different way of seeing those old longings and imaginings.

In other words, the *ritual table fellowship* that had been an identifying hallmark of Jesus' "earthly" ministry would become the sacramental sign by which the former disciples would be able to look and "see" their risen Lord, in experiential and transformative ways.

In fact, this would become so *persuasively revelatory* for these two "witnesses" in the Emmaus story, according to Luke's faith community, that the need for any further post-resurrection appearances was instantly and utterly unnecessary.

To make that point dramatically clear, the moment they recognize this "new" Jesus – that is, the moment they "see" this new, revelatory truth for themselves – the transitory presence of a post-resurrection Jesus instantly vanishes.

Only then are they able to fully take in what they had already experienced. And the first thing they did was to leave supper on the table, and hit the road again; yet strangely enough for what must have felt like the first time. They rush back to rejoin the others, with the happy news of what

they'd seen; what had "been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

By the end of that long, long day, they had been tired and footsore. But now they found themselves nearly in a *foot race*, so eager were they to be the first to tell everybody and anybody who'd listen. Suddenly the old road they'd travelled so many times before must have looked different to them. With new eyes they saw a new and different way of travelling what had once been the old way.

Suddenly the old road they'd travelled so many times before must have looked different. With new eyes they saw a new and different way of travelling what had once been the old way.

So, Easter is not about the eternal existence of Jesus of Nazareth. Nor is resurrection about the immortality of some mortal beings such as you and me, who win for themselves a chance to escape our ultimate demise by reciting some magical (that "whosoever believeth ...") formula.

At the same time, resurrection *is* about life and death. Those of us who've had the opportunity to experience a few of those little deaths along the way have gotten a glimpse of resurrection.

It is about dying to an old way of being, and being raised up to a new life, and a new way of being. We come to know how this is made most evident in the way of life Jesus has shown us. So resurrection is about *a way of life*, not eternal life.

Not only that, it is counter to just about everything to which we cling; most of all our own fear of losing and loss, our own mortality, and – as some have put it bluntly – the death of ego. Contrary to what may be the most commonly assumed

understanding of the meaning of Easter, resurrection is not about the eternal and perpetual existence of *me*.

In fact it is just the opposite. It is about losing oneself to find oneself; and finding one's truest self in a God who takes on nothingness in the form of death (Philippians 2:7 -- Paul describes it as "emptying himself," taking on the form of a "slave," same thing) for the sake of the other.

If there is anything *life saving* about this, then it is to be seen in this way of living in the world.

To "see" this, consider the two cases of Carlos Flores and Susan Guy, and their two life-and-death stories that are as amusing as they are illustrative:

Two months ago, on a Sunday morning, Carlos Flores, 36, was already running late when he got to the 103rd Street station in NYC; only to discover a crowd had gathered on the platform, where a man from East Harlem had fainted and fallen on the subway tracks below. Flores decided to attempt a rescue after seeing a digital countdown clock indicated the next train was still three minutes away.

"I jumped on the tracks. I grabbed him. I stood him up," Flores later told a *Daily News* reporter. "I'm walking him toward the platform. A guy on the platform grabs his hands and pulls him to safety. Now I'm down there. I turn around and the train's coming."

Fortunately, another traveler had informed the station agent of the emergency. The agent radioed into the Rail Control Center in time to notify the train's conductor to stop the subway just as it entered the station.

When the reporter later interviewed the subway hero, they asked Carlos the question everybody asks ordinary human beings who step up and risk their life to save a total stranger from certain death.

Carlos replied in all candor, "I was thinking, If he gets hit, I can't go to work. It's Sunday. I can't miss out. It's a time-and-a-half day." (!)

Later the same day, in Memphis, Domino's Pizza delivery driver, Susan Guy, had been waiting for the daily order from her most faithful customer. In fact, they'd often make the large pepperoni pizza ahead of time, knowing 82-year old Jean Wilson would be calling shortly.

But when the elderly woman who lives alone didn't call as she had *every day for the last three years*, Susan grew concerned enough to tell her boss she was going to check on her, with or without a pizza.

When no one answered the front door, Susan called police, who discovered Jean lying on the floor inside. She'd fallen the day before, and was unable to get up and call for help. Later, as Jean was recovering in a nearby hospital from her minor injuries, investigators mused how her daily diet of pepperoni pizza may have saved her life.

But others praised Susan, calling her a hero. "I'm overwhelmed," she was reported saying. "I'm just a pizza deliverer, that's all."

In both stories someone's life-saving effort saves someone else from an early demise. Though the result is the same, if there's a difference, of course, it's about the way both so-called heroes went about what they did, not the one who's life was

"saved." Carlos was on his way to work, and Susan *went out of her way*.

In both stories someone's life-saving effort saves someone else Though the result is the same, if there's a difference it's about the way each so-called hero went about what they did ... Carlos was on his way to work, and Susan went out of her way.

In his classic, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg writes,

"What the earliest layers of the gospel record reveal is that Jesus taught the "narrow way" as opposed to the broad way of convention and tradition. Both his life and his message were subversive and modeled the metaphor of death and resurrection as a way of life. Discipleship was not about knowing new things or subscribing to certain theological statements or positions, but about the never-ending process of dying to an old self and being reborn into a new one. It was made obvious by a *new way* of being in the world."

Borg goes on to speak of the cost of choosing such a path; a cost those two early disciples racing back to Jerusalem from Emmaus may not have fully appreciated in their initial joy,

"Because such wisdom can make the scales fall from our eyes it often produces what French philosopher Jacques Lacan calls *la douleur de voir trop clair* (the pain of seeing too clearly). Opening oneself to this disparity between the world as it is and the world as God intends it to be leads either to despair or ... to the kingdom of God ... It is a table, laden with grace, at which the social maps are all redrawn.

At the onset of Holy Week this year, before the commemoration of the so-called “*Last Supper*,” we reflected on the characters of Judas and Peter. We talked about betrayal and denial. This time, it’s all about supper again; suggesting the “Last Supper” wasn’t, in fact, the *last* supper.

This time, it’s with Cleopas and another unnamed disciple who’s eyes are opened, their hearts are set ablaze with a message, and their lives (I suspect) are changed forever. And, at the risk of Professor Humphrey’s shallow despair, this time it happened on a Sunday, not a Wednesday or a Thursday.

Much more recently, I would suggest the last time such bread was broken, with a way of life we might want to call resurrection, it was on a Monday. The would-be disciple’s names were Susan and Jean. And the bread they broke was made from pizza dough.

© 2011 by John William Bennisson, Rel.D.

All rights reserved.

This article may not be used or reproduced without proper credit.

A COPY OF THE DESIGNATED LECTIONARY TEXT IS
FOUND ON THE NEXT PAGE



Supper at Emmaus, He Qi , 2001 .

Gospel Reading from the Christian scriptures, the Gospel of Luke 24:13-35

Luke's post-resurrection tale of a risen Lord's strange appearance to two nameless, disheartened disciples.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.