

What Are You Talking About!?

A Sermon Expositing Luke 24:13-35

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Because of everything that has happened in recent days even before the answers begin to reveal themselves there is a sense, is there not, that understanding the *questions* being posed is perhaps the most important task before us?

The anxiety, fear, conflict, and death we have witnessed and experienced in these days has brought about the kind of individual and collective trauma that changes everything. We can sense now that we are not headed back to the way things were, but to something new, different. But are we in control of what will be different about the days ahead? And if we are, what will we choose, what *should* we choose to do differently? How will we shape our tomorrows in light of what we've seen? Or are the kinds of things that will happen in the world now so determinatively affected by what has happened as to be inevitable, outside of our control? If so, what will happen? Will I be ok? Will *we* be ok?

This is the thought process that I imagine Cleopas and his travelling companion were going through as they hung their heads and kicked the loose pebbles down the Emmaus road. They were apparently on the way home or at least out of Jerusalem as the festivities of Passover began to wind down. Their experience of that festival did not go, as you are aware, according to their hopes. They had followed the one they hoped would be the anticipated redeemer of Israel there, but his conflict with the powers that be got out of hand. In what seemed like a million years compressed into a few days they watched as the enthusiastic welcome he received faded into bitter conflict, betrayal, arrest, and death. Who knows how long the initial shock can last from a trauma like that? As their journey began, they did not yet even possess the *capability* to process what had happened and what it meant for them and for the world, but they did have the capacity to walk and so they took to the road and travelled through a gathering cloud of critical questions yet to be articulated. It was on that road that a man they did not recognize approached and asked us the one question that would frame the way we would answer the others.

Yes, asked *us*. Don't tell me that as I described the tenuous position the disciples were in during those frightening days that you couldn't hear its echoes in the days we're living now. We too are struggling to understand what has just happened and how it will shape the world and what our role within - whatever that will be - will be. The questions we have for ourselves as modern followers of Jesus living at a pivotal time are only beginning to take form. We can't yet even imagine what questions are coming our way, so let us begin with the one question that is right before us, the one posed on the Emmaus road, "What are you talking about?"

That's how we hear Jesus's question isn't it? At the point in the story he asks it the disciples don't yet even recognize him. They're making their way out of Jerusalem hearts heavy, minds in a fog when someone on the road simply strikes up a conversation – or rather seeks to join theirs. It's easy to imagine – or at least it was in the days before social distancing – a solo traveler going in the same way as two others looks to pass the journey with conversation so he strolls up next to them (without even a mask) and says, "Hey, what are you talking about?" It is a question so innocuous we hardly even notice it in the story. It's just a transition, a way of

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

getting into the exchange between Jesus and these disciples. In that sense it isn't really even a question. It's more of an invitation – a self-invitation into the conversation of others.

If we haven't thought any more of Jesus's question than that it would be understandable. It's a good story with a good outcome even if that's all there is to the question. If that's all there is to the question then this is a story about the Risen Christ coming alongside people in a dark and difficult time and joining them where they are. I have no qualms with that whatsoever and the in-person, on-campus version of this sermon ends right there – God is with us in this mess. Amen. – and that would allow us to dismiss and get to brunch ahead of Jesus's other modern day followers. But brunch is largely a do-it-yourself proposition at the moment so while the waffle iron warms up let's look at that question one more time. Or rather, let's look at the response of Cleopas to Jesus's question. It's odd. Or at least it is if Jesus's question really is a non-question, a simple segue into conversation. He says, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He's shocked at Jesus's misunderstanding, but what room is there to be shocked if Jesus's question is one of unawareness as to the topic at hand? If Cleopas had understood Jesus's question to be an inquiry as to the topic at hand we wouldn't expect a shocked response. We would expect him to say something like, "Well, we were just talking about all that happened back there." But in the moment having read what we can't read – the body language, the timing of Jesus's approach with the question itself, the tone of voice, the non-verbals – Cleopas has understood Jesus to mean something more than, "Hey can I join you in conversation for a bit?" Cleopas has understood Jesus's question to be not one of ignorance to the topic, but one of clarification as to what he has already heard.

Let's try it with a bit of inflection. Jesus's question as we tend to hear it I think comes when Jesus walks up unaware of the discussion at hand and simply says, "So, what are we talking about?" But consider how the story changes if Jesus comes up, overhears a bit of their conversation about what has taken place in Jerusalem, then says, "*What are you talking about!?*" It's possible we're majoring in minors here, but I think there is significance in how we read Jesus's question. It may very well have an impact on the way we address the questions that are coming at *us* in the days ahead. I don't think Jesus is asking cluelessly what the topic is. I think he's heard the topic and it doesn't make sense to him. The story that Cleopas and his traveling companion are weaving is unrecognizable to Jesus, so he asks for clarification. That clarification reveals why the story is unrecognizable. They recount *to Jesus* the story of *Jesus* in conflict with the powers that be being handed over, tried, convicted, and crucified. Their account of the disorienting events even carries them, through the eyes of some women, to a tomb where Jesus was laid, but now is missing. That's where their story stops – at an empty tomb! For Cleopas and his buddy what has happened in Jerusalem is an utterly disorienting story of despair and death.

What are you talking about!? That's not what the story of the events in Jerusalem is about!! Jesus, still unrecognized, tells them that the story *is* one of suffering, pain, loss, even death, but a short while later when they've broken bread together and the two disciples finally see that Christ is risen indeed they finally see that the story they were telling is only loosely based on the events in Jerusalem. Their story was unrecognizable to Jesus himself who lived the events they were talking about, because it left out resurrection! They buried the lead!! Fortunately, with Jesus what is buried doesn't always stay buried.

In the days and weeks ahead we will have a huge number of difficult questions about what comes next. Some of them will be our own questions for ourselves, others will be congregational, some will be political, social, societal questions posed to us all and we as people of faith will hope to be part of answering them. We don't yet know what all of those questions will be let alone how we will answer them, but the way we've experienced this one question here on the road to Emmaus will shape the way we respond to the rest of the coming questions when the time comes. If on the road to the life that follows these events we hear Jesus say, "Hey, what are you talking about?" we will hear a request from God to join with us as we travel this road. That will be well and good, but innocuous. That question doesn't challenge the way we answer, it doesn't compel us to anything new or better. It comforts us, but it doesn't push us through the darkness and into resurrection.

If, on the other hand, we hear Jesus ask, “*What are you talking about!?*” we may be reminded that what is behind is not the whole story. There is resurrection yet to come. There is, for that matter, resurrection here, now, in front of us! Whatever the rest of the questions are, if we answer them in light of resurrection we will not be returning to life as it was, but to a whole new life.
Amen.