

The Gospel According to Cleopas

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Shine your light upon us, O God,
as we seek to be enlightened.
By your Spirit, open our eyes,
our minds, and our hearts
as we prepare for the coming
of your Son. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35 (NRSVue)

The Walk to Emmaus

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then 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?" ¹⁹He 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, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But 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. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and 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. ²⁴Some 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." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. ³²They 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?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – The Gospel According to Cleopas

(Holding up the newspaper) Did you happen to read the back page of this morning's newspaper? It talked about a newly discovered ancient document: The **Gospel According to Cleopas**, dated around **63 AD**. It was recently discovered in Nicopolis—near the Road to Emmaus. It's an informal letter between Cleopas and the church in Emmaus and surrounding areas.

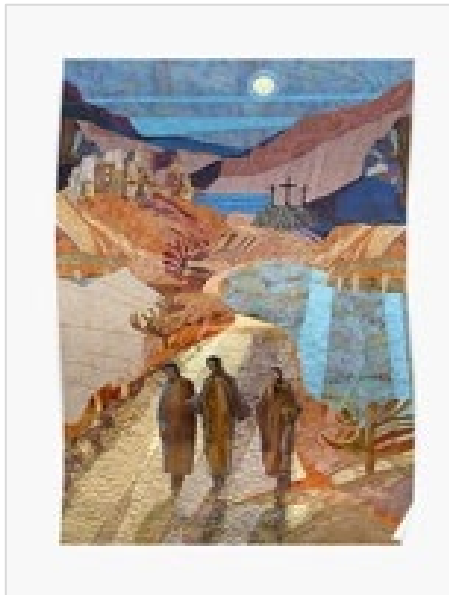
Would you like to hear some of the portions recently translated into English?

The Prologue: Cleopas 1:1-6

I, Cleopas, called to be a minister of the good news of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, and your sister and my wife Aviva,

To the church of God that's in Emmaus and Nicopolis-- May the grace and peace of God rest upon you as you seek to diligently follow in the footsteps of our Teacher and Messiah Jesus. As I'm about to finish the race of faith that has been placed before me, it became clear that I needed to set down an orderly account of the encounter my wife and I had with Jesus of Nazareth after his resurrection on the road to Emmaus. May the ears that hear the reading of this account be softened to the summons of our Savior, inviting all to come and follow him who is the Way.

Shall I read on?



Cleopas 3:1-45 Prophet Mighty in Deed and Word

I, Cleopas, and my wife Aviva were walking the *wrong way* on Emmaus Road that first Easter evening. Away from Jerusalem and away from the fellowship of the disciples. We were despondent that night—Jesus of Nazareth was dead.

Like Jonah, we were going the opposite direction that we should've been going.

In our grief and confusion, we found ourselves looking to the setting sun—west of Jerusalem, rather than to the risen Son, the morning star in the east—Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Little did we know Jesus would come to seek us out on our journey of escape away from God.

Suddenly a stranger on the road approached us and came alongside us on our Emmaus wanderings. We thought he might be a fellow pilgrim returning home from Passover.

"You seem to be in deep discussion about something. *What are you so concerned about?*" said the stranger.

It's almost comical looking back on it now. My wife and I were so amazed this stranger didn't know about the rumors spreading around like wildfire. But in actuality WE were the ones that didn't know what was going on. This clueless stranger actually knew EVERYTHING!

Maybe it was the glare of the sun in our eyes or that I ate one too many stuffed grape leaves for lunch. But looking back on it all, we didn't recognize Jesus because God hadn't opened our eyes yet. Or maybe it was just the blinders of our unbelief.

Has there ever been a time in your faith journey, where you just didn't "get" what was going on?



So, I said, "you must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about the turmoil going on there the last few days."

Then Jesus incognito innocently said: **What things?**

I got the out-of-towner up to speed on things. Jesus was a man of God from Nazareth, a prophet who taught the words of God with power and authority—like Moses. And he wasn't only talk—he healed people of their diseases and turned water into wine—even the winds and the waves listened to him. He was highly respected by all the people and God. But the religious scholars and leaders weren't too fond of him, in fact, they despised him. They figured out a way to hand him over to the Roman authorities who had him crucified. Our hopes of deliverance were dashed again. But today we've started hearing some strange stories from the women about visions, angels, empty tombs, and missing bodies. My wife and I have been trying to figure out what all this means and what to do next.

Then the stranger said to us:

"Why are you so foolish and reluctant to believe in all that the prophets have said? Wasn't it clearly foretold by them that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his time of glory?"

The stranger's rebuke startled us—he had our attention.

Now, the letter goes through some of the passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus quoted that spoke of him. Would you be interested to hear them? Should I read on?

Jesus then quoted selections by memory from the Torah—first in Deuteronomy:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Then from the Psalms:

They have pierced my hands and feet. My enemies stare at me and gloat. They divide my clothes among themselves and throw dice for my garments.

From there, without missing a beat, a portion of Isaiah rolled off his tongue as we walked:

He was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped and we were healed! All of us have strayed like sheep. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all. From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins—that he was suffering their punishment?

And finally Zechariah:

They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died.

To think that we didn't realize Jesus was leading us in a Bible study for hours!



By this time, we were on the outskirts of Emmaus. Our traveling companion wanted to continue on, but we begged him to stay. He said he didn't want to put us out and that he had some friends to visit, but after much urging, we convinced him to eat with us and stay the night because it was getting late.

As we reclined at the table to eat, the stranger took a small loaf of bread, asked God's blessings on it, broke it, then gave it to us.

Suddenly, the torch light went on in my head and my heart!

The multiplication of the loaves and fish! And the meal that the disciples told us about a few days ago before his crucifixion in the Upper Room—Jesus gave thanks, blessed, broke, and gave the bread and then the cup! It was Jesus!!!!

At his opening of the Scriptures, our eyes were opened.

Seeing the broken bread representing his body, we could see truly see him now.

We felt as if our very hearts were a bond fire.

Have you ever had an especially powerful encounter with God reading the Scriptures or taking communion, the Lord's Supper?

And then no sooner did we realize who it was, than he disappeared into thin air.

Even when God chooses to reveal himself, there's a hiddenness and mystery, just to make sure we don't think that we can capture God. As Job says, *"When he comes near, I cannot see him. When he moves on, I don't see him go."*

After Jesus' revelation, after hearing the Word, after the Lord's Supper, we realized that our holy Scriptures point us to the Messiah. Suddenly, we could connect the dots:

Jesus was anointed by the Spirit of God, to rescue his people by preaching the good news to the poor, freeing those under Satan's bondage, curing the sick, calling sinners to repentance, suffering upon the cross, and conquering death. He is a prophet mighty in word and deed, but more than a prophet—Son of the Most High God, who calls us to repentance and to return to the one God. And to walk the path that he walked. To do the works of Christ in the power of the Spirit.

What I think Cleopas is saying is that Christ wants to be our guest and for us to entertain him in our lives & homes & churches. At the same time, Christ is our host who feeds us at the Lord's Supper. We are his guests.

Well, we knew we couldn't stay the night in Emmaus. In the darkness of night, we turned right around and walked seven miles back to Jerusalem by torch light. When we arrived, the disciples were still awake, and they shared with us that the Lord is Risen! Jesus had also appeared to Peter.

There are other fragments that haven't been translated yet, but there was this last greeting and parting advice in Cleopas' newly discovered document:

Cleopas 10:28-37 Greetings and Final Admonitions

– Greet Antigone, Ecatarina, and Hippodomia—their service in the churches has been of immense value and blessing to the people of God, and especially for their delicious Key Lime pie at our last potluck.

– Greet Gasious and Phlegon. And please, above all remind Gasious to bring his herbs for his chronic stomach ailments—for the good of the assembly of believers in his midst during worship gatherings.

(Sorry folks—Cleopas wrote this—not me, I'm just the translator.)

And finally beloved, be careful that we don't just talk about Jesus—without being able to recognize that he is in our midst as we talk about him! Ask God to take your blinders off as you read the Scriptures and partake of the bread and the cup. Greet the strangers in your midst with hospitality and love—because you may be entertaining angels... or even the Christ of Emmaus.

I Cleopas, write this with my own hand. Grace, peace, and love be upon you now and always.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Emmaus," 2022 by Paulo Medina, AbsoluteArts.com

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