

# Third Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

In one BBC depiction of the story of the gospels, the actor who played the resurrected Jesus was a different actor than the one who had played Jesus up until then. It was such a wise piece of theological artistry – because it confused the audience. They, too, were wondering “Who is this person?” In this week’s text — the story of two disciples meeting a stranger along the road to Emmaus — we hear of how strangers can affect each other. It is a story of gradual revelation, where in familiar gesture they recognise what is the deep truth. They speak honestly to him “Are you the only stranger who doesn’t know what’s going on?” but yet they are also compelled towards him, urging him to stay with them and continue the conversation. There has been a human encounter on the deepest level.

Have you ever had a conversation with a stranger that moved you deeply? Or have you ever been the stranger who accompanied another, providing listening, wisdom or space for them?

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## Text

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.

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## Comment

The whole of the gospel of Luke has been a long journey narrative. Almost from the beginning, the Temple and the story of Jerusalem has been central. However, immediately following the final temptation of Luke, Jesus begins walking around Galilee and in the ninth chapter he “turns his face towards Jerusalem.” However, he doesn’t arrive there for ten long chapters. It isn’t until late in chapter 19 that he finally arrives there. By this stage the anticipation has build up to a high point. In the genre of a classic hero quest where the hero has a destination at which some significant event will occur — an event that is the locus of both speculation and misunderstanding — the gospel of Luke builds on the anticipatory intuitions of readers.

Travel is a central motif in the whole text. Jesus is travelling towards Jerusalem and towards a final event that he understands in a different way to his disciples.

The disciples in Luke’s gospel seem to understand that Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem will bring about some kind of political and religious revolution. Despite the messages that are embedded in the long and intense journey to Jerusalem about death (especially Luke 9:21–22) they have continued to believe in and hope for some kind of temporal relief to self determination in both religious and political affairs. Along the road to Emmaus, the disciples say to the stranger “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

The two disciples have gone to Jerusalem and their movement from Jerusalem to Emmaus may be symbolic of a departure from the whole project of being disciples. Along the way they have a strange companion, a companion stranger. He asks them questions, he is a blank slate of information upon whom their own grief and bewilderment and expectation and hope is projected. He is the questioning counsellor who asks the questions that evoke information and story and sadness. In this way, he is an image of patience amidst misunderstanding.

It can be difficult to be misunderstood. To think of the human experience of Jesus, he prepared — albeit sometimes obliquely — his disciples to expect the worst but not to lose heart. However they neither understood these preparations nor did they accompany him in his pain. And here he is, the unaccompanied one accompanying those who did not accompany him. It is an image of generosity, an image of journey, and an image of walking into the grief, misunderstanding, bewilderment and need of those who have consistently missed the point.

Under many circumstances irritation would be an entirely understandable response. The experience of consistent misunderstanding can cause deep pain, but in the witness of this stranger, the disciples are accompanied into an understanding that had hitherto evaded them. True, the stranger says “oh how foolish you are!” – but this doesn’t stop them reflecting, later, on the quality of conversations “Did not our hearts burn within us?” The word used for “foolish” – *anoetos* — can mean unwise, or foolish, but it builds on a word meaning “sensual” – it seems that the stranger is saying to them “how surface level you are!” and indeed, we read later that they went from surface level understandings to the deep perfection of the heart, made clear ultimately in the breaking of bread.

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## Response

Have you ever been consistently misunderstood someone? What was it — if at all — that helped create understanding?

What are your habits when you feel misunderstood – what kind of conflict arises in you? How does this manifest in your relationships?

A simple drama between two people (two adults; two children; one adult, one child; one adult, a number of children) could help illustrate the ways in which misunderstanding can deepen conflict — perhaps one person could ask the other what they did in Sunday School, or during a church trip, or in school and consistently misunderstand. What happens? How does the other respond? How does misunderstanding contribute to escalating feeling? What happens with the body?

How, therefore, can a conversation occur when a stranger comes into the story and takes them on a walk?

Janet's idea of giving instructions about drawing a bird —

Ask someone to give instructions in a different language.

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## Prayer

Jesus, our patient brother,  
You have walked alongside us  
even when we have misunderstood.  
Take us deeper, past the surface levels  
to the places where our heart burns with  
understanding and accompaniment.  
Because you are our path and our  
companion. Yours are the words of heart and life.  
Amen.