Why Are You Downcast?

Discover Jesus’ Conversation with the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus
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Introduction

God will walk with us always, always, even in the most painful moments, even in the worst moments, even in moments of defeat. That is where the Lord is. And this is our hope.

— Pope Francis

Jesus has risen, but no one knows. After his public Death on Calvary, his followers are immersed in darkness, but a new dawn is beginning. Jesus has chosen two of his disciples who are returning home from Jerusalem. He appears to them as just another traveler among the many people who journey to and from Jerusalem for the Passover feast.

They don’t recognize him because he doesn’t want them to. What could be the reason for this? If they had known it is Jesus, come back to life, they would have believed anything he told them—how could they not have faith in the Risen One!

Earlier, since Jesus had established himself as Rabbi, his prestige was enough for many to fully accept his teachings. In the discourses and dialogues recorded in the Gospels, Jesus’ authority, confirmed by miracles, was enough to inspire belief.

Throughout this journey, however, he prefers that they use their reason rather than simply accept what he says based on his authority. He wants them to pause and reflect on what has happened. And he opens their eyes so they understand and allow themselves to be persuaded by the very force of truth. That is why this conversation is unique.

The power of this dialogue lies in the relationship between what is said in the Bible and the events they experienced in the life of Jesus. Until now, Jesus had not explained the connection: This is the first time. And it is the only occasion in which the Rabbi does so in a systematic way: Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Lk 24:27).

The Beginning of the Road

This drama of the disciples of Emmaus appears like a reflection of the situation of many Christians of our time: it seems that the hope of faith has failed. Faith itself enters a crisis because of negative experiences that make us feel abandoned and betrayed even by the Lord. But this road to Emmaus on which we walk can become the way of a purification and maturation of our belief in God.

—Pope Benedict XVI¹

Jesus died on the Cross on Friday. He was buried with some urgency in order to finish before sunset, when the ritual Sabbath rest officially begins. The first rays of light on Sunday announce the end of the second night after those painful events. At dawn, several women gathered at the tomb in order to complete the preparation for his burial.

Around the same time, two of the disciples are preparing to leave since they have decided to return to their village, Emmaus. Before leaving Jerusalem, they go to the Upper Room to say goodbye to the Apostles. The Apostles open the door, taking precautions on account of their fear. Peter and John are absent. After the disciples share their sadness, outrage at how their leaders have behaved, and total lack of hope, Peter and John arrive. They share that Mary Magdalene had told them early in the morning that Jesus’ body had disappeared from the tomb, and they immediately went to see. So it was. Other women had told them they saw angels announcing that Jesus is alive, but no one has seen him. The disciples do not know how to explain these strange events, which they attribute to the deep pain felt by everyone. They say goodbye and leave for Emmaus in order to arrive at a reasonable time.

They are grief-stricken, speaking with one another about the sad events of recent days. By Saturday they concluded that

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Regina Cæli (April 6, 2008).
the dreams they had cherished until then had vanished forever. In addition to the crisis of faith in Jesus, there was no one left who could lead the group, nor did they have clear objectives. No longer could they rely on voluntary financial support. They felt persecuted by the authorities: the entire Sanhedrin; Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea; as well as Herod, the local ruler of Galilee. They were defenseless, lacking even a roof under which to shelter (they had borrowed the Upper Room), and Jesus had not given them instructions on how to keep going. Humanly speaking, they had no way out of their situation.

As they are talking, they remember two similar stories that happened recently: Theudas arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered (Acts 5:36–37).\(^2\) Jesus had also gathered many people, but the sad end had come.

Their mood fluctuates between disappointment and indignation, sadness and anger against the authorities: They feel discouraged and betrayed. When they remember how he was imprisoned, tried unfairly, and handed over to the Romans, anger courses through their veins. But their helplessness in light of what happened immediately gives way to discouragement, and they feel pity for themselves.

**The Meeting**

\[^{2}\text{This is the sincere argument that Gamaliel makes before the Sanhedrin.}\]

\[\text{[(Two of them were) talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them,)}\]

\[\text{J: What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?}\]

\[\text{[And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him,]}\]

\[\text{C: Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?}\]
[And he said to them,]

J: What things?

[And they said to him,]

C: Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up 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 this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even 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 him they did not see.

[And he said to them,]

J: O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?

[And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.]

(Lk 24:14–27)

———

C: Understand? Believe the prophets? He is dead! Dead and buried! Our dreams have faded, and our hope has been nailed to the Cross by the Romans. We have no choice but to go home. Everything is over. Why should we keep fooling ourselves? Everything is lost.

L: Calm down, Cleopas. We cannot change anything in this sad situation by being carried away with outbursts. We would have preferred a different outcome, but there is no remedy now.

Still, why do you say that he had to suffer? It seems that you know something about what happened. Do you think that all of this makes sense?

J: Of course it makes sense, although in these moments it might be difficult for you to accept.
L: I’d love to hear what you have to say, and I’m sure Cleopas would as well.

C: Yes, indeed. Please forgive my reaction. I’m a bit emotional, and the actions of the authorities have troubled me greatly. On the other hand, I’m devastated by the loss of our Rabbi.

L: My name is Luke, and this is Cleopas. We live in Emmaus and if you are going the same way, we’ll have a while to talk. We would like to understand this situation from another perspective, and we hope that you will tell us yours. Any light, even a dim one, could help us endure this pain. What is your name?

J: You may call me Ben-Joseph. As you know, it means son of Joseph, and I like this reference to my late father. I’m heading in the same direction, and I’d be glad to join you.

THE REASON FOR THE PASSION

L: Thank you for accompanying us, Ben-Joseph. I would like to start by asking if you knew Jesus of Nazareth.

J: Who doesn’t know him?! In my case, I have been following the news about him daily with increasing interest, and I had the opportunity to meet him. At the same time, I have gotten deeper into the Scriptures. They are second nature to me, so don’t be surprised if you find that I have answers to many of your questions.

But it seems that you know him well, and I take it that you have accompanied him closely in recent years.

C: Yes, I had been following him for a long time, and I encouraged Luke to join our group.

J: Then you may answer this question: Is it true what they say about his prophecy? I heard that Jesus himself had announced that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes (Mt 16:21), and that later they would deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day (Mt 20:19). Did you hear him say these things?

C: Yes, he certainly said so, and on several occasions.
L: I, too, heard him say that. But here we have to admit our lack of skill and discernment since it didn’t fit with what we were seeing, and we were afraid to ask him about it because he spoke so seriously. Right, Cleopas?

C: Very true. It felt as if we were at a funeral, not knowing the cause of death, and yet not wanting to embarrass ourselves by asking.

L: The only clear thing is that recent events have taken that prediction to an unimaginable extreme. Even now we don’t understand why he had to suffer so much and die.

J: Well, since we have time, I’ll explain in more detail about how I understand it. You’ll see that it makes sense, although it is difficult to accept.

We must, however, approach it with the logic of God, which is different from human reasoning. And this paradigm shift requires that we see the Creator’s relationship with humanity as a whole. So, we need to begin with its very origins.

C: Are you going back to Adam and Eve?

J: That’s right! They had received their existence from God, as did the animals and plants, the stars, and the very earth we walk upon. But God gave them more: They were created in our image, after our likeness (Gn 1:26).

This simple statement has a wealth of meaning, but for now let’s note that they received the ability to know and love as people, and along with that the gift of freedom to choose what is good. Moreover, God granted them other graces, above all the privilege to enter into an intimate relationship with him. Some are amazed at the grandeur and beauty of nature, and they marvel that we can know only a tiny part of the universe we behold. Understanding that all of this has been created for humankind, the psalmist’s question arises naturally: What is man that thou art mindful of him? (Ps 8:4).

L: It’s true; pondering the magnitude of creation makes us feel small.
C: For me, looking at the stars is enough to make me sense the immensity of the universe and my littleness in comparison. Sometimes it even makes me dizzy!

J: The intimate life of God is incomparably deeper and more marvelous than the entire material universe, which is why it is so remarkable that God invites humankind into his inner life. I tell you all of this because it is necessary to grasp the immensity of the gifts that God freely gave to Adam and Eve before understanding the consequences of their response.

God had treated them with boundless kindness, but they mistrusted him. They rejected the great love he had shown them.

The serpent led them to doubt God, claiming that he had lied to them. And he promised that if they disobeyed the Commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree God had forbidden them, they will be like God, knowing good and evil (Gn 3:5), without needing to conform to what God had already established (cf. Gn 3). It was a lie, but they were attracted by the potential to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

God had established laws of moral behavior to facilitate our freedom, not limit it. These directives guide us toward our own good, and wanting to get out of following them would mean leaving the way that leads to one’s happiness. But they did not want to accept this.

It would be like taking that detour over there, forgetting that we’re going to Emmaus. And so, Adam and Eve disobeyed God to their own undoing.

C: And sadly, to ours as well!

L: Did this offend God?

J: More than anything, God was hurt to see that they trusted the serpent and not what he had told them. They distrusted him, and that distrust is the root of all sin. It is an offense against the one who had given them every reason to trust him.
Epilogue

Amid the shadows of the passing day and the darkness that clouded their spirit, the Wayfarer brought a ray of light which rekindled their hope and led their hearts to yearn for the fullness of light. “Stay with us,” they pleaded. And he agreed. Soon afterwards, Jesus’ face would disappear, yet the Master would “stay” with them, hidden in the “breaking of the bread” which had opened their eyes to recognize him.

— Saint John Paul II

L: Speaking of sunsets, the day is ending, and up ahead is our destination, Emmaus.

J: Yes, it’s been a very nice conversation, and I think you all have a lot to meditate on. So, I’ll say goodbye now and wish you a good night.

C: Wait! When we started walking, our entire world had fallen apart, and we felt as though we’d been left standing amid the rubble. Now we see that each stone is part of a huge mosaic, resulting in a beautiful image. We don’t know how to repay you.

L: Furthermore, the next town is a long way off. Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent (Lk 24:29), and you can continue tomorrow. Also, we could keep talking and then, who knows, perhaps we might meet again one day in Jerusalem!

J: If you wish, I’d be grateful to you since after journeying and talking together all this way, the day is almost over.

[So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other:]

C: Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?

[And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.]

(Lk 24:29–35)