

[Slide 1] **A Mystery of the Heart – A Sermon on Luke 24:13-32**

Gracious God: Take our minds, and think through them.
Take our lips, and speak through them.
Take our hearts, and set them on fire with love for thee.
What we know not, teach us.
What we have not, give us.
What we are not, make us.
For Jesus Christ's sake. AMEN

- Donald Coggan (1909-2000), Archbishop of Canterbury.

Good morning. Last Sunday on Easter we declared with joy the resurrection of Jesus – we sang “Gloria’s” and Alleluia’s, and we talked of Jesus’ triumph over death. We also confessed, however, that for the first followers of Jesus, his resurrection did not first lead them to express such confident, victorious words, but instead resulted in them being “perplexed, terrified, and amazed.” And we confessed that in our own way today we too find ourselves perplexed, terrified, and amazed when confronted with the reality of new life in Jesus. You might say that we learned that faith in Jesus’ resurrection and the victory and joy that it brings does not take away all the ambiguities and mysteries of life, but in some ways only plunges us deeper into them as we trust in the power of God that does not come from us (2 Cor. 4:7).

Given that much of the life of faith is a mystery to be lived rather than a problem to solve or figure out once and for all, a key task of our faith is to dwell deeply within that mystery – to make our heart’s home there and let God’s life and love unfold ever new truths to us. Well, that is just what we want to do throughout this and the next 5 Sundays after this – we want to dwell in the mystery of Easter – of Christ’s death and resurrection – so that we can embrace Jesus in greater measure and have our hearts moved to live the faith we declare. [Slide 2] During the prelude today, there were some questions up on the screen that were there to make you think a bit about what you believe about Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the life of faith, we always start

somewhere, with assumptions and ideas that ground us and give us a starting point. As we practice dwelling in the Easter story of Christ's death and resurrection, it is important to name and acknowledge that we bring these assumptions and ideas with us and that this is a normal part of our faith journey, even as we continually seek to learn ever-new truths about God and about ourselves.

One way we can practice dwelling in Easter, then, is by beginning with naming what we already believe about Easter. Christians have for millennia now expressed basic convictions about Jesus' death and resurrection with varying differences in theology and emphasis. I'm sure if we polled everyone in this room about the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, there might be great variety in our answers, even if we hope there would be some core points of unity holding us all together. With regards to points of unity, we might acknowledge our Mennonite Confession of Faith when it attempts to name core convictions saying this about Jesus' death and resurrection: **[Slide 3]**

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh. He is the Savior of the world, who has delivered us from the dominion of sin and reconciled us to God by humbling himself and becoming obedient unto death on a cross. He was declared to be Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead.

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In the shedding of his blood on the cross, Jesus offered up his life to the Father, bore the sins of all, and reconciled us to God. God then raised him from the dead, thereby conquering death and disarming the powers of sin and evil.¹

Woah. There's a lot to unpack there. That said, there are some fairly basic convictions that over the next several weeks we will have the chance to explore more in depth. Let's review two of those basic convictions: **[Slide 5]**

1. Jesus bore the sins of all and reconciled us to God.
2. God raised Jesus from the dead, conquering death and disarming the powers of sin and evil.

¹ <https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/cof>

If we are looking at basic summary points for Christian understandings of Jesus' death and resurrection, these are pretty good ones. Admittedly, there are aspects to these statements that require significantly more exploration, especially if they are going to be formational statements that shape our hearts and minds and not just academic ideas we talk about. But, as starting points, they are helpful. While confessions of faith like our Mennonite Church's serve the function of providing an outline, as well as basic guidelines and guidance on Christian beliefs, it also must be said that faith cannot be summarized simply into bullet points, and so confessions are really most helpful as starting points for dwelling in the mystery of the life of faith. Confessions are, you might say, important starting points for a discussion that we are having along the road of life. **[Slide 6]** As we discuss and interpret the faith we've inherited, we find we are met, often unexpectedly, by God who can open to us new understandings and move us into new ventures of life and faith.

I'm not sure if you caught the reference, but when I suggested that our confession of faith might serve like a starting point in a discussion we are having as we walk along the road, I was making an allusion to our scripture for today from Luke 24 – often called “The Road to Emmaus” story. In this story we find two heart-worn disciples of Jesus walking the road to a village called Emmaus, and while they are walking, they are talking about everything that has happened over the last perplexing, terrifying, and amazing days: Jesus was killed just when they thought he would liberate his people from Roman tyranny, then he was laid in a tomb, a tomb that three days later was discovered empty, and then there were women who said they saw angels who had declared that Jesus was alive. As they are discussing all of this, someone that these disciples think to be a stranger walks along with them and inquires as to what they are discussing, and they tell him everything. Soon this stranger, with enthusiasm and with a bit of a

sharp edge, begins commanding the discussion by pointing out to these two disciples through the scriptures how the things that happened to Jesus of Nazareth were understandable if they would just open their hearts. While these disciples don't verbalize their feelings in that moment, we know from later in the passage that while this "stranger" is talking, the men's worn and tired hearts become quickened, and they begin to see the scriptures open before them in new ways, understanding everything that happened with Jesus in a new light.

These disciples presumably knew these scriptures beforehand. Maybe they had read them a thousand times. Maybe they even memorized portions of them. Maybe they had their own version of confessions of faith to guide them. But at this new stage in their journey, they needed new eyes in order to see how everything the scriptures had promised about God's deliverance could still be true after everything that had happened with Jesus. As we heard on Easter Sunday when we gathered around the communion table, it wasn't until Jesus —this seeming stranger— broke bread with these two disciples [**Slide 7**] that they discovered it was him that had been among them and that their hearts had been so quickened along the road because Jesus' presence had moved in them to open their hearts. This episode makes me think of Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 18:20: where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. These two, gathered in Jesus' name and seeking the truth about him, were met by Jesus.

A first lesson we can take, then, from this episode of scripture [**Slide 8**] is that the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus are not self-evident ideas that we can proclaim apart from doing our own work of searching and seeking together as disciples gathered together in Jesus' name. The death and resurrection of Jesus are mysteries whose depths are to be plumbed by the heart, quickened by God, not simply ideas to be proven or figured out. Sometimes when we read the New Testament, we fall into a tendency to place ourselves above

the first followers of Jesus, assuming that we know far more than they did because we are arriving so much later in time than they. We assume, in this case, that the confounding mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection – its meaning and significance for us and for the world — were sorted out by those disciples so that we don't have to wrestle with those same mysteries but can instead rest assured in the answers. What we discover throughout the New Testament instead, however, are numerous different reflections on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, all coming from different perspectives – all aimed at trying to express the mystery of God's presence in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Ironically, I think this story of the road to Emmaus shows us that exactly when we think we have a comprehensive understanding of how these significant parts of our faith are supposed to work, we find ourselves saying: “But we had hoped he was the one to....” and then fill in the blank with whatever hope you might have had that was left wanting. Just like those two disciples walking the road to Emmaus, however, Jesus comes alongside us today, asking us to look again and listen again before presuming to know, so that we might be open to hear God's truth for us now.

Perhaps a second lesson our scripture for today teaches us is that **[Slide 9]** our “looking again” at the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection is best done by looking back on Jesus' life and ministry and its connection to the larger story of God's people – and indeed this is one thing that we will do throughout this series. The two disciples that encountered Jesus on the road that day had to have Jesus interpret to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. While Luke is sparing on details here, I think it isn't a stretch to say that the “things about himself” that Jesus pointed to were hardly restricted to the end of his life but instead would have encompassed his whole ministry of healing and saving. Contrary to some narrow descriptions of Jesus' saving significance as God come in flesh for our salvation, Jesus did not only accomplish his mission by

dying on Good Friday and rising again on Easter Sunday somewhere in the 30s of the Common Era. Instead of looking at it that way, our scripture for today encourages us to consider how understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus requires us to look back on his *whole life and ministry* as a ministry of dying and rising again for our salvation – of forgiving sin and overcoming evil and death and of bringing new life. Jesus, we will discover in the weeks to come, was from birth to death and to new life, God bringing forgiveness, reconciliation, and deliverance from sin, evil, and death. Not only does Jesus ask his disciples to look back, however, at his life as it was. I think in its own way too, the road to Emmaus story encourages us to consider how understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus requires us to look forward to his *ongoing saving ministry active in the present* among us today through his body, the church. **[Slide 10]** Proclaiming Jesus' death and resurrection means proclaiming these as present realities too: God continues to bring forgiveness, reconciliation, and deliverance from sin, evil, and death today. **[Slide 11]**

So, may God be with us in these next weeks ahead as we seek to have our hearts quickened by the risen Jesus as we contemplate his death and resurrection. May God cause our hearts to burn within us as we meet the risen Jesus in the community gathered in Jesus' name around the scriptures. And, in the words of our hymn of response, throughout it all may we be found waiting expectantly in this season for new revelations of the mystery that at present God alone can see.