

# ENCOUNTERS

WITH

# JESUS



Number Twelve:

# EMMAUS ROAD

## *ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: EMMAUS ROAD*

*Jesus' crucifixion seemed to be  
the end of the story. But it wasn't.*

## *EMMAUS ROAD*

In our agitation and distress we don't notice the stranger approaching. He is suddenly there with us. I look over at him as he matches our walking pace so companionably. I don't recognise him, though his walk seems somehow familiar. He's not from Emmaus, I'm sure of that, but something tells me that I have seen him before. It's no good though; I can't place him.

Cleopas and I stopped our conversation when the man joined us and now the three of us go on together in an awkward silence. Cleopas isn't very good with strangers and it would be highly inappropriate for me to start a conversation with a man I don't know.

It is the stranger who breaks the silence: "What were you speaking about when I joined you? You seemed in some distress." This seems to incense Cleopas. He stops walking and explodes at the stranger; "Are you a tourist, a visitor to Jerusalem that you don't know what has been going on there?"

I am embarrassed by his rudeness and about to apologise for his behaviour but the stranger seems quite unaffected. In a quiet measured tone he asks, "What has been going on?"

"It's Jesus of Nazareth. He was a great prophet who said and did many wonderful things. He loved God and he loved all the people. But our cowardly despicable leaders were jealous and fearful so they handed him over to the Romans to be beaten and put to death on a cross!"

Cleopas stops, overcome with anger and bitterness. I take up the story: "We had hoped, had believed, that he was God's anointed one come to save Israel but we were wrong as it is now three days since they killed him."

"Except," bursts in Cleopas, "except that some of our women went to his tomb this morning and found the body gone. They claimed to have seen a vision of angels who said that he was not dead but alive."

"Some of the men went to see for themselves," I add, "and they found it just as the women said. But none of us know what it all means."

"Oh dear," says the stranger, "how can you not understand? Do you not know the Scriptures? Let me explain to you..." And he shows us

## *ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: EMMAUS ROAD*

how the Scriptures foretell that the Messiah will come and that he must suffer death and then rise again.

I don't remember all of it but he included Moses' foretelling of a prophet like himself; the prophet Isaiah writing of God's servant suffering and dying for the sins of his people; the psalmist describing the tribulations which the Messiah must undergo but that his body will not see corruption; Job saying that, "I know that my redeemer lives"; and also the prophet Hosea saying that, "...on the third day he will raise us up."

It is amazing. We are captivated by this man, by his easy way of speaking, by his utter command of Scripture, by the way that everything starts to make sense. Suddenly Jesus' death begins to seem like an affirmation of his ministry rather than a denial of it.

The time has gone by so quickly that we are at the door of our house before we are really aware of it. I stop suddenly. "Oh, we're here. This is our house!" I sound surprised and am suddenly embarrassed.

The stranger smiles gently and bids us farewell. At last I remember my manners. "Oh, no, please don't go. It's getting dark. Do come in and eat with us." The stranger seems a little reluctant but I press him. Cleopas joins in and he acquiesces.

We enter the house and I hurry into the kitchen. So much has happened in the last week that I worry that there will be nothing to share with the stranger. Fortunately, there is some ground barley left and the fire is still hot. So I mix the flour with some oil and salt and quickly bake some flatbreads. While they are cooking I find some milk, cheese, olives and figs. I look in the stew pot but there is nothing left, nothing edible anyway. So much has happened that I haven't even washed it out this week. Oh well, this will have to do.

I put everything on a platter and take it through to the other part of the house. Cleopas and the stranger are already sitting at the table. I put the food down, with the bread in front of Cleopas so that he may start. But to my astonishment the stranger reaches across and picks up the bread. Before I have a chance to be outraged at this breach of good manners, he speaks, "Blessed are you my Father, LORD God of the universe. We have this bread to offer. May it be to us food for now and for ever. Amen."

## *ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: EMMAUS ROAD*

He breaks it and hands it to us and my eyes are opened. Now I understand. I have heard that voice before, saying, "This is my body..."; I have seen those hands before; I have watched those tender expressive eyes before. How could I have been so blind? It is him! It is Jesus, here, alive with us.

My eyes mist with tears of joy and when they clear he is gone. This room, which a moment ago seemed so full of his presence, is now empty and dim again. For a moment I am disappointed but then the joy bubbles up. He is alive! The women were right, incredibly, impossibly right. Jesus has overcome death. He is, without doubt, the anointed one, the Son of God.

I look over and see Cleopas also blinking away tears. "We should have known," he says, "who else could explain the scriptures like that? Who else could captivate our hearts in such a way?" He pauses, reflecting. "We must go back and tell them," he suddenly announces; "we have to go back to Jerusalem and tell them what has happened here."

Of course we must. Then I realise something. Neither of us has yet spoken his name. "It was him, wasn't it? It was Jesus?" Cleopas nods silently, not trusting himself to speak. We stand and hug, then go out of the door into the late afternoon sky.

The Passover moon is just beginning to rise as we walk in silence back to Jerusalem. We hardly speak on the way. Words seem awkward, impotent, superfluous. We must have walked fast for we seem to have covered the miles in no time at all and we find ourselves at the gate. The sun has almost set now and we are just in time to enter the city before the gates are shut.

We hurry through the narrow streets with the traders packing their things away and come to the door of the house. We knock and eventually are let in, the door being quickly locked behind us. They are still being cautious but it is immediately obvious that the mood has changed. Bubbling excitement dominates the room. John greets us excitedly. "It is true!", he says. "The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon Peter."

Wonder on wonder! We tell of our own experience and the room gets even more full of exuberant joy. There are smiles and hugs and excited conversations going on everywhere. Suddenly, though, the room

## *ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: EMMAUS ROAD*

grows quiet. Everyone is looking towards the door. I turn, and see that someone else has joined us. This time there is no mistaking him.

“Peace be with you,” he says. Some of them, those who had not yet seen and believed, are frightened. I hear whispering. “The door is locked. It is his ghost!”

“Why are you troubled?” That old familiar voice calms the room instantly. “Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me. I am no ghost.” Still there are murmurings of doubt. Jesus smiles fondly at us. “Do you have anything to eat?” Someone gives him a small piece of cooked fish. He eats it, all of it. There is no doubt—he is alive; flesh-and-blood alive just like you and me.

Yet, why did we not recognise him on the road? How did he disappear so suddenly from our house? How can he enter a locked room? Flesh and blood cannot do such things. Jesus is alive, bodily alive; that is indisputably true. He is alive but more than alive. He has somehow transcended life and entered a life after life, a life which is both ordinary and divine.

No wonder then, that a week later Thomas would drop to his knees and cry out loud what we all have been feeling: “My LORD and my God!”

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### *NOTES*

Luke's gospel contains the only account of this encounter with Jesus, although there is a verse at the end of Mark's gospel which may refer to the same event:

"After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them." (Mark 16:13-14)

The location of Emmaus is unknown, though there have been several suggestions. Luke tells us that it was 60 stadia from Jerusalem. Although there is some doubt about the exact distance, most authorities agree that this was about seven miles, a couple of hours' walk.

Cleopas is mentioned by name by Luke but his companion is not; which has led to much speculation. One of the suggestions, which I have adopted, is that the companion was Cleopas' wife. This seems to make sense since Cleopas and the companion seem to have been living together in Emmaus.

We do not know what Jesus said on the journey but it may have included references to Moses' prophecy about a prophet like himself (Deuteronomy 18:15); Isaiah's references to a servant who will suffer for the people (Isaiah 53:3-9); Psalm 17's insistence that God's Holy One will not be abandoned to the grave or see corruption; Job's statement about the redeemer and the forthcoming resurrection (Job 19:25) and Hosea's reference to the third day (Hosea 6:2).

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