

Now and Then

a sermon
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Trinity Reformed Church
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Luke 24:13–35

The week before last, my youngest child decided which college he's going to attend in the fall.

Boy, do I feel old.

I mean, it's weird. Wasn't it last week that he was a baby? Wasn't it yesterday that we moved to Rochester, Christopher 4 years old, me still in my 30s? I look back, and I look around, and I marvel, with words many have said for themselves: "Where has the time gone?"

I don't know if he feels something similar; if this is kind of weird for him, too; if he, too, is in a bit of denial that one main chapter of his life, and ours, is about to close and a new one is about to open. But I think he might very well wonder, too, "Where has the time gone?"

And gone it has, moved on to where all time goes: the past, a misty place of shadows and echoes, which you can never enter directly but only by memory and recollection. It can be nice to go there, and recall with delight the many happinesses received from

family and friends,
hearth and home,
the places we've seen,
the fun we've had,
the work we've done.

But it is not an easy delight, because what is remembered really *is* the past, and so it is gone, capable of being known and felt only in memory.

Now is not then.

It's easy for some, I think, to dwell on the past, so earnestly that they would, if they could, dwell *in* the past. The memories of what once was are so strong, so glistening and golden, so *flawless* ... why can't we just return to that? Why can't today be more like yesterday?

And yet the past is gone. Now is not then.

For some of us, of course, the past is not so happy. Memory is painful. The shadows and echoes that populate it are of the sorrows we've suffered and the failures we've forged. To remember is to *regret*, because we'd like to return to yesterday

so we can fix it,
so we can prevent it from being marred,
so we can erase the blot before the stain is even spilled.

Why can't today rescue yesterday?

And yet the past is gone. Now is not then.



It seems to me that the followers of Jesus in our Bible passage today were having this struggle with the past. They walked along on their way from the city of Jerusalem to the suburb of Emmaus in a daze, for they were so overwhelmed by the events of the past week. Jesus — their master, their rabbi, their teacher — he was dead, a holy man executed as a criminal.

Oh, if they could only go back and change the events of the past few days.

Oh, if they could only go back and experience again the happy times of his teaching and healing.

Oh, if they could only go back and again enjoy the joys they had shared.

But it could not be. There would be no returning to enjoy, nor returning to prevent. They were so keenly aware that now is not then.

Such is what lay behind their sorrow as a stranger joined them on the road. He overtook them, he walking a bit more briskly than they.

“What’s up?” he said. They wondered, “Has this man been living under a rock?” For they had been certain that everyone knew about what had happened to Jesus, that everybody had been talking about it. But this guy apparently knew nothing.

So they told him the whole thing:

how Jesus had been a great man,

how he had healed and taught,

how he had entered Jerusalem to great acclaim,

how the establishment had come down upon him,

how all had turned against him,

how he had been beaten, crucified, put to death.

This is why they were sad: what they were relating, this tale they told to that stranger, was about events all in the past:

what had *happened*,

who Jesus had *been*,

the things that *were*.

All that was gone. There was no going back. Even the strange news from some of the women followers of Jesus simply served to highlight for them the futility of it all, from which no wishful thinking could rescue them. For these forlorn followers, all they had of Jesus was memory. And they knew: now is not then.

The stranger on the road did not answer as they expected.

He did not question them for more details.

He did not offer them consoling words.

Instead, he gently scolded them, telling them that the events of the past few days should not have been a surprise. And then, as they walked along, he led them on a journey through scripture, through the prophets and the psalms, showing them that it was expected, it was necessary, that the Messiah, God’s promised one, would suffer before he was glorified.

Our two friends on the road, they found themselves helped by this a little. There was a growing awareness, the embers of a fire stirring within them. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” they later said.

But the reality had not dawned on them. They still pined for a past they believed was no longer present. Their hearts were still heavy with the loss of “then” and their perceived emptiness of “now.”

And so it took something special to change their attitude. It wasn’t anything they did,

no mental trick,
no emotional self-help therapy,
no connecting the dots on their own

that did it. No, it was what the stranger on the road did next that changed things for them, that changed everything.

They sat down to eat. The stranger took bread. He broke it. He gave it to them.

In that moment, because of this simple action, their eyes were opened, a glorious “Aha!” moment in which they saw the stranger as friend, the guest as host, because he did in their presence what he had done before, breaking bread with them now as he had done then, on his last evening around a table in an upper room with his disciples.

He opened their eyes to his presence, because he was truly *present* and not merely past.

They saw him for who he was: this was Jesus, not dead but alive, not a figure of the past but the Lord of the present.

As he *broke* bread, he *joined* present and past, now and then, then and now, uniting them by his power and his love, as only he can do.



Of the many things we can learn from these verses, this is what I’m hearing:

Jesus is with us, and by his power, we are with him. Because his then is now. He makes himself present to us, out of his love and grace.

He’s not an artifact from years gone by.
He’s not a legend from history.
He’s not an occasion for reminiscing about the past.

No, he is Lord of all time, the one who brings together now and then, then and now.

Because of this, because Jesus is with us, because Jesus unites then and now, the church is, and must be, the gathering of the people of Jesus, the people who know, and follow, and love Jesus,

Jesus who is with us,
Jesus who is now as he was then.

Sadly, the church sometimes isn’t such a place. Sadly, instead the church can become something like a museum. Churches sometime fall into that, they become museums:

monuments to human achievements derived from faith,
repositories of relics of long-forgotten religious meaning,
libraries of dated or obsolete expressions of Christian activity,
shrines dedicated to the faith of others now long gone.

As H. Richard Niebuhr has said, tradition is the living faith of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Churches become museums when they become shrines of traditionalism, designed to curate the dead faith of the living, rather than communities of lively faith in the risen Lord Jesus, whose gospel is joyfully passed on, “traditioned,” from one believer to another.

And just as the church must not be a museum, so should the faith of individual Christians not be mere nostalgia, a yearning for “the good old days,” wishing to return to those days, all the while despising the time, *this* time, God has given us. Because Jesus is not merely in the past. He is with us now. And by his grace *we* are with him, now. The Jesus we remember is the Jesus we also know and follow and love, this day, and the next, and the next.

When this is forgotten, or where it is not known, faith withers. Faith becomes merely a holding on to a past that used to mean something. It becomes a pining for a feeling we once had. And when the feeling is not replicated or reinforced (perhaps by a church’s pastors or programs), then some feel resentment, anger, disappointment, discouragement. They assign blame, and withhold love, because the present does not measure up to the past they have idealized.

The problem is that both past and present, then and now, are felt and perceived apart from Jesus. But without Jesus, neither past nor present, neither then nor now, can be truly understood, truly felt, truly loved.

Those two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, they had a feeling. Their hearts burned within them, they recalled later, as they walked along the road to Emmaus with the stranger whom they had not yet learned was their friend. But they did not understand the feeling, not until Jesus opened their eyes. The experience was not truly meaningful to them until they understood its significance. And when they did, when Jesus gave them understanding of what they had experienced, when he revealed himself to them, then the feeling became *more* intense, more real, because it was more truly understood and known.

I believe that it is much the same with us. When our faith is weak, when we don’t have a lively appreciation that Jesus is with us now, then we so easily pine for feelings we used to have, feelings that (perhaps we forgot) were at first about faith in Jesus. What then happens is that the *feeling* becomes the goal, just the feeling. But this is all so frustrating, because there is so much fog about this feeling, a feeling we don’t truly understand. How could we? We have forgotten the one in whom we believe, Jesus, who inspires our feelings of love and devotion, and can do so because he is with us, joining our present to his past and his future.

Yes. Jesus is with us. By his power and love we are with him. He meets us, sometimes when we expect him, sometimes when we do not. And he opens our eyes to his presence, in scripture and at his table.

He does this, and can do this, because he holds in his hands yesterday and today and tomorrow.

It is he, the beloved Son of the Father,
whose good news we welcome,
whose teaching we receive,
whose love masters our hearts and minds,
whose mercy molds our attitudes,
whose wisdom orients our feelings,
whose past, present, and future become our truest home,

he is the Lord of then and now.



My friends, let us live as Easter people, whose faith is not nostalgia nor whose church is a museum.

Let us live as Easter people, who believe in the risen Lord Jesus, now and always with us:

teaching us,
guiding us,
blessing us,
causing our hearts to burn within us.

Let us live as Easter people, as those, then, who know Jesus now.