

Living in the Larger Story

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Bible Text: Luke 24:13-35
Preached on: Sunday, July 12, 2009

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Well, good morning Metrocrest. You're awake, that's good. Good news. Well, I am honored to be with you this morning not only to worship with you and to preach the Gospel to you and to me, but also honored to be considered to join you in your mission to show and tell the good news of Christ to your neighbors and the nations and the next generation. Thank you for considering bringing us all into your team and into your family.

In August of 1992, with one year of marriage under our belts, Christine and I packed our little U-Haul truck and drove to Dallas, Texas from Tennessee and in December of that year, I was hired as the part-time youth director at a place called Metrocrest Presbyterian Church in Carrollton, Texas and now 17 years, 3 kids, 1 dog and some gray and gone hairs later, we are looking at the possibility of another August move from Tennessee to Dallas to serve at Metrocrest Presbyterian Church. So we are honored to be in this place again.

I've been listening to Pastor Ron's sermons over the past few weeks, just checking them out, making sure he's still got it and I've been listening to those on the internet and I'm thankful that he has preached a series called "Lessons from a Broken Pastor." Two reasons I am thankful for that: the first reason is, because I am one. I am a broken pastor and so I'm comforted to know that I'm talking to people who love broken people and broken pastors as you have loved Pastor Ron and Pastor John is broken too, I'm sure he would admit. But the other reason I'm thankful for that is because I feel like this is a continuation of the series, another lesson this morning from another broken pastor. And this lesson is one that I'm still learning but one that I believe God began to teach me when I was here the first time back in the late 90s. During my first 2 years of seminary as I was getting trained to understand and know and to teach the Bible, I have to confess that I actually lost my love for the Bible in those first 2 years and I struggled to hang on to the God that the Bible reveals. Somehow the Gospel story lost its flavor on my desk over time and I began to look elsewhere to try to taste something that I thought was fresh and alive but was actually just feeding on the wind.

I was lost and confused about who Jesus was and why he mattered. I was hopeless that I could or would ever change. I was discouraged and I remember reading an article one day during that time in which the author expressed some similar struggles in his training for

ministry but he encouraged his readers to not get bogged down in all the technicalities of the Scripture but to remember that this is a grand and great and glorious story that God has given that reveals who he is, who we are and how we are to relate to one another and live and love together. And that was it. That's what I had lost. I had lost the big picture. I had lost the story. Somehow, I had lost the fact that this book is telling a real living and active story of God's grace at work in the world and that he wanted me to be caught up in it with him and to catch others up in it with us.

Now, it would be easy for me to blame seminary or the study of the finer points of theology or the study of Greek and Hebrew, to blame all that on my loss of the story but that's not fair and it's not accurate. Those things are designed for us to be trained to deeper understanding and appreciate and to live in and out of this story. But the problem was my heart. My heart got bogged down in the details. My heart was disconnected from God and disconnected from a cross centered community and when that happens, you lose the story. But God in his grace didn't leave me there, thankfully he sent people, a few key relationships alongside me to help me understand what was going on; 2 men in particular that God sent into my life for those last 2 years that I was here in Dallas. One was a counselor whom I visited regularly for the last 2 years that I was here and he helped me to unpack the good, the bad and the ugly of my story and to see it in the light of his great story of grace and to see what it means to apply the Gospel to a broken life. The other man that God used in those years was your pastor, Ron D. I had never known a man who would sit in front of me and weep over his own sin in prayer, confessing his sin to God, embracing the Gospel again and again. This is what we did in his office; we didn't just talk theology. And God used those 2 men and others to enlighten my eyes and inflame my heart again to see that I'm part of something very, very big that God is doing. I'm indebted to him for even letting me be a part because he could have and should have just crushed me.

So the lesson this broken pastor is learning is that disciples of Jesus must learn love and live in the larger story that God is telling in his word. This would be the lesson that I bring to continue to learn and to share with others here as the Associate Pastor of Youth and Discipleship and that is that discipleship at whatever age or stage of life is mainly about becoming a community of people who together learn the story God is telling in his word, who together love that story above any other competing smaller story in which they might be tempted to live and who together will encourage and equip one another to live in the story of God's kingdom and invite others to join them. That's discipleship and that's the lesson that our friends in Luke 24 were learning as they traveled to Emmaus. Like me, these 2 disciples were hopeless. They were discouraged. They were lost and confused about who Jesus was and what difference it made to know him. He was not who they thought he would be or should be. So before we read this passage, let's pray and ask God's Spirit to give us understanding and application of his word.

Let's pray.

Father, we come this morning knowing that your word says that you are good and that all that you do is good and that apart from you we have no good thing, and so we come

desperately to you and ask that you would open our eyes and that you would set our hearts ablaze as we study your word together just as these disciples learned after you opened Scriptures to them and opened their eyes and they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us along the way?" This is what we want to happen in us today. Light us up as you lift us up into this story that you are telling about yourself. We ask these things in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Let's read Luke 24. You know, Jesus has resurrected. This is Easter Sunday and the women have gone to the tomb, the tomb is empty, the angel said, "He is not here. He has risen. Why do you look for the living among the dead? Go, tell his disciples." They go, they tell the disciples, the disciples are confused, "What are these women telling us? What kind of tall tale is this?" They run, they look, Peter marvels at the fact that Jesus is not there. Then Luke shifts the scene: 2 disciples walking on the 7 mile journey to a village called Emmaus. It would probably take them all day to get there. They wouldn't get there until the evening and Jesus appears and begins walking with them. So let's pick up that story in verse 13.

13 That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. 16 But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

It's funny, isn't it, to know what's happening and you know who they are talking to but they don't.

19 And he said to them [I love this], "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21 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 happened. 22 Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, 23 and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. 24 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." 25 And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses [the first 5 books of the Bible] and all the Prophets [the rest of the Old Testament], he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

28 So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, 29 but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31 And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" 33 And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

So our friends were discouraged, lost and confused, hopeless and what did Jesus do? He came alongside them, walked with them, listened to their conversation, listened to their story. He asked curious questions about what was going on in their lives. Even though he already knew the answers, he still asked and then he told them his story and showed them who he really was and how following the resurrected Jesus would blend the story of their lives into his. That's what he did.

Now, before we go any further, I want to stop here and quickly suggest 2 ways that we could approach this passage. It seems to me that there is a pattern that Jesus has established in the Gospels whereby he would talk about, "Well, this is what I have done for you, now you do that for others." Theologians may call it the indicatives, the facts that have been done and the imperatives, the things you're supposed to do, and you do the imperatives based on the indicatives. We do this because Jesus has done this for us. And that's a way we can look at this and just so you know that I'm not making that up, here are a few examples of how Jesus would say, "I have done this for you, now you do this for others." In John 13, he says, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." A little later in that chapter, he said, "just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." John 15, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." John 20, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." "I have been sent, now you'll be sent." Then Paul in Philippians 2 says this, "Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant." In other words, Jesus through Paul is saying to his disciples, "Do what I did. Don't hold onto your rights. Empty yourself in service to others, even to the point of suffering. Take up your cross and follow me." So that's the pattern, "As I have done for you, you do for others."

Now, this morning we're going to look at what Jesus did for these disciples and has done for us. We're really only going to have time to focus more on what he has done but as we do that, I hope you will be listening for, "Well, what has he done that now he has called

them and us to do?" We'll touch on that but we're going to focus on what he has done and there are 4 ways that Jesus ministered to these disciples and has ministered to us, served us, and I want to mention those 4 ministries and then we'll try to illustrate that and talk a little bit about how we can do them as well.

The first is the ministry of incarnation, of becoming flesh. Jesus, it says in verse 15 of this passage, "Jesus himself drew near and went with them." He showed up in the flesh and entered their world, physically walked with these 2 disciples. I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of John 1:14. He says, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." He moved into their life at that moment. He moved into their story at that moment. In the ministry of incarnation, Jesus drew near these disciples by entering into their world and story. The ministry of incarnation.

Secondly, the ministry of inquiry. What did he do after he showed up? After he moved in, what did he do? Well, he paid attention and he poked around. Let me explain. First, he paid attention to their story. He made an effort to listen to them. He walked with them for a while before he said anything. He was aware of their conversation and their concerns. He was listening for their hopes and fears and desires. Then he started asking questions. He started to poke around a little bit into their story. He started not only just to listen but he wanted to learn more as if he needed to, but he was curious and so in verse 17 he asks, "What is this conversation that you are having?" So they explained, "Don't you know what's going on about this Jesus?" Then verse 19, my favorite question, "What things?" As if he's kind of playing dumb but he's drawing them out. That's the ministry of inquiry, to draw out their stories.

Now, what did he learn about their hopes, fears and desires? Three things: he learned that they lacked hope, that they lacked faith and that they lacked love. Now, he already knew that but they got to learn it as he drew it out of them. They lacked hope. They said in verse 21, "We had hoped that this one, this Jesus was the one to redeem Israel." Their hopes were dashed. They were hopeless. "Apparently he's not the one." They lacked faith. Jesus said to them in verse 25, "You are slow of heart to believe all that the Old Testament," well, to them it was the only testament, "all that God has said all these years. You are slow of heart to believe. Your faith is sluggish." They lacked faith. Their hope, first of all, was misplaced. Jesus was not the Savior they hoped he would be and then their faith was misplaced, Jesus was not the Savior they believed he should be. Sometimes we think we are believing in Jesus but we're not believing in him as he is actually revealed. We believe in our own version of him, what one preacher recently has called, Jesus Junior. But thirdly, they lacked love. Now, how do I see this? Well, look where they are going. Look at the movement of their lives. The Christ and people loving community that they were called to be a part of was in Jerusalem and they were headed somewhere else. The Christ and people loving mission that they were called to with that community was back in Jerusalem and they were headed somewhere else. They were walking away from love and we know that because later after Jesus set their hearts on fire and opened their eyes and they recognized him in the breaking of bread, they immediately went back to that Christ and people loving community and their Christ and people loving mission. He lit love in them. So they lacked hope, they lacked faith, they

lacked love. Jesus was not the Savior that they thought they loved. They loved the Messiah made in their own image and they were expecting a conqueror to overthrow Rome and Jesus came to conquer their hearts.

So that's the ministry of inquiry, drawing out these disciples by exploring their world and story and exposing gently their lack of hope, faith and love. Then he moved on to the ministry of interpretation. After Jesus drew near these disciples and began to draw them out, he then moved to drawing connections between their small story and his large story and by doing that, he drew them up into that larger story. This is the ministry of interpretation. They had grown up hearing all the stories of the coming Messiah all of their lives but they were like those disciples that Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures looking for eternal life and you missed me. You're supposed to come to me." That's why they are there. These guys had the Scriptures but they didn't have Jesus. They knew the Bible but they hadn't connected all the dots so that Jesus appeared on every page and so he drew the connections for them by beginning with Moses in the first 5 books, walking them through the Scriptures, interpreting the Scriptures, it says, translating them, explaining them, so that they could see him and see that the Scriptures were all about him.

Now, wouldn't you have loved to have been there to hear that 7 mile sermon? Wouldn't I love right now to have 7 miles to finish mine? But I don't. I mean, if you can download the MP3 of that sermon that he preached to them along the way, it would sell millions and we would all go, "Yes!" But it's not there. Now, I want to briefly try to, I don't have time to unpack everything but I'd like to briefly try to help you get an idea of maybe what he was unfolding to them in this way. This is how I understand it. The Bible is telling this story in 3 acts, it's a 3 acts drama. You could make more acts but it's at least these 3 acts: creation, fall, redemption. In the first act, in creation, like John talked about earlier, God made a community of people to be in his image and reflect his image. Well, what is God? God is a God centered community on God's mission and his mission is to multiply his glory in the universe so he had to make the universe so that he could fill it with his glory. So in creation, he created a community of people who were to be God centered people, a God centered community, on God's mission with him. So he made people in his own image, people who were to have "you first" hearts, who were to look to God and say, "You first." Look to others and say, "You first." And look to all that God has made and say, "You first. I'm here to guard and keep you." Adam and Eve were made to be people, where the arrows were pointing to God, to others and to all that God has made, a community of God centered people with God on God's mission.

Chapter 2, Act II: the fall. They ate the fruit and that was no snack in the woods, that was a revolution. That was a rebellion. They said, "I don't want to be on God's mission. I don't want to be a God centered community, I want to be a 'me first' community on a 'me first' mission," and so they ate and from then on we have all had "me first" hearts. The arrows instead of pointing out to God, people and all he has made, instead of us using ourselves to serve God, others and his creation, now we use God, others and his creation to serve ourselves. That's the result of the fall.

So Jesus is walking them through saying...he's not letting them know yet, "The Father created this people, this kingdom of people, to be on his mission but they fell. They rebelled. They are no longer and they got kicked out." Then Act III is the whole rest of the Bible. It's the whole rest of the Bible. It's the act of redemption. This is what the King is doing in order to rescue and restore a God centered community who will, with him, be on his mission and he's going to turn the arrows back. In order to do that, Jesus would have taught these disciples, in order to do that, he said, "Me," because these people would never be able to do it for themselves. He gathered them together through Abraham, things looked like they were going well all the way up until David's reign and it seemed like God's kingdom was working, they were God centered people on God's mission. It looked like it but no, there was a problem in the hearts of people. They were sinners. So he sent Jesus in the flesh to be the true Israel, the true Adam, who obeyed perfectly in our place and who paid for our rebellion so that after he was resurrected, we by faith in him would be a people resurrected to be re-created in his image. That's the story. That's what God is up to. That's what Jesus is drawing these disciples up into that and saying, "Not only are you part of this, this is your mission to gather others." So that's the ministry of interpretation. The Bible is not about us, it's about him and we get to join him in his mission.

So Jesus drew them into the larger story as he drew connections between theirs and his, by explaining how all of the word of God in the history of the world is about him. Finally, his fourth ministry to these disciples was the ministry of ignition. In drawing those connections, in drawing them up into the larger story, he was ultimately drawing them to himself. That's where he wanted to get them. Pay attention to what happens to these disciples. When Jesus enables them to rightly place their faith and hope in him as he is offered in the pages of Scripture, the Spirit of God ignites them and sets their hearts ablaze. It may have happened like this: when he opened the Scriptures to them on the road, he lit the fuse and their hearts began to burn. 10, 9, 8, 7, then at the right time when he was ready, 6, 5, 4, dinner with the disciples in Emmaus, 3, 2, 1, he broke the bread, he gave it to them, ignition. He opened the eyes of their hearts so that they recognized him for who he was. He drew them to himself and blast off, he's gone and so are they. They are on their way back, a whole days journey. It's already nightfall. They go straight back to that Christ and people loving community and that Christ and people loving mission. Love is set ablaze in their hearts. In the ministry of ignition, Jesus drew these disciples to himself and set them ablaze with passion for God and compassion for people by enlightening their eyes and inflaming their hearts to see and to serve him for who he really is and that's what he has done for us.

So those are the 4 ministries: incarnation, inquiry, interpretation and ignition. That's the ministry he left for them. The whole book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, is their outworking these ministries as he had show them to do. You know, Luke wrote both Luke and Acts and at the beginning of Acts, he says to Theophilus, the one to whom he wrote both of these books, he said, "Theophilus, remember in my first book I told you all that Jesus began to do and teach, all that he began to show and tell and in this book, now, I'm going to tell you what he continues to do and teach by the power of his Spirit through his people." So the book of Acts and our lives as well, we are continuing the ministry of

Jesus, these 4 ministries of Jesus, in the power of the Spirit and it's showing and telling the Gospel. The only one of these ministries that we can't truly do is the last one. None of us have the power to ignite faith and hope and love in the life of any person, only the Spirit can do that. So our ministry of ignition is to pray that God would light the fire, that he would open the eyes as he did for Lydia in Acts 16.

I want to just briefly share an illustration about what this might look like and then I'll close with one last thought. Recently, I officiated a wedding and during the premarital discipleship time, as I normally like to do, I asked this couple, I tried to get them to fight and that's not usually hard to do. I asked them to tell me about a struggle they recently had with one another, you know, some conflict. So they told me about this conflict and he particularly was talking and as he talked, I thought, "Wow, I hear a lot of despair here. I hear hopelessness. Not only hopelessness that will she ever change but will I ever change, are we ever going to really be able to change and love each other like Christ wants us to?" It kind of just, this cloud and I thought, "Oh boy, what am I going to tell him? I'm hopeless to change my own self. I've been married for 18 years and I'm still got a 'me first' heart."

In one of those prayer moments, I actually asked God what I should say and the story of Ezekiel 37, the story of the valley of dry bones came to my mind. Do you know that story? God shows Ezekiel this valley of dry bleached bones, I mean, that's dead. That's as dead as it gets. They are all scattered everywhere and he says, "Ezekiel, can these bones live?" Ezekiel gives a great answer, "Lord, you know." And God says, "Yeah, they're going to live. Preach. Prophecy to the wind," which in Hebrew and Greek "wind" and "spirit" are the same word. "Prophecy to the wind. Come into these bones and make them live," and so he did and the bones began to rattle together and the flesh began to form on these bones but there is not yet life in them. He said, "Preach again. Prophecy again to the wind, the breath to enter, the Spirit to enter," and they came to life and now the valley was filled with this huge army. Where there had once been deadness, dead bones, there is now a living army and God said to Ezekiel, "This is my people Israel. They were dead but they are going to live again. I'm going to resurrect these people. They don't deserve it, I'm going to do it for my glory."

So I thought of that story and I asked them, "Do you remember that story?" They said, "Yes," and so I told them that story and then I tried to put it in the context like I did for you a moment ago of creation, fall, redemption. We were created to have this loving relationship, marriage and otherwise, but in the fall, we lost it and we all became selfish people with no hope for change, but the third act is all about resurrecting dead bones into living people who love God and one another. And I said, "That's your story. That's your story. Don't lose hope because you're going to be here again. You're going to be frustrated with one another, you're going to be frustrated with your own lack of ability to change but this is your story." I could sense hope rising again in them and in me because, as it turned out, I needed to hear exactly what God had given me to say to them. I needed to be encouraged that God is about resurrection and he has that power and it lives in people who hold onto him by faith and to what he has done.

Well, what about today? Does Jesus still...and all that was to illustrate, incarnation, inquiry, interpretation and then praying, "God, light a fire here," ignition. What about today? Does Jesus still minister to us through these 4 ministries? Yes he does, through his body the church. The church, the body of Christ, and this body of Christ is a cross shaped community that draws near to us and enters our world and story in the ministry of incarnation. It's a community that draws us out by exploring our stories and gently exposing our lack of hope, faith and love through the ministry of inquiry. It's a community that draws connections between our little stories and his large story, drawing us into that larger story by explaining the Bible and its message of reconciliation through the ministry of interpretation. Finally, the church is the body, the community that prays that the Spirit of Christ would enlighten our eyes and inflame our hearts to learn and love and live in his larger story, that's the ministry of ignition.

That's what God wants to do and is doing at Metrocrest and you are in great shape to be used by him for these ministries because just as Jesus was recognized by those 2 disciples in the taking and blessing and breaking and giving of the bread, so too Jesus will be recognized by others as we, the body of Jesus, have been taken and we have been blessed and we are being broken and given to our neighbors and the nations and the next generation and when that happens, the Spirit will open their eyes and people will recognize Jesus and their hearts will burn too.