

Historic Commentary

(Third Sunday in Easter - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 24:13-35 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

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Ephrem the Syrian: At his radiant birth therefore a radiant star appeared, and at his dark death there appeared a dark gloom ... The Lord of the star appeared in his own person to the two who were traveling with him along the road, but his identity was hidden from them. His star too was like this, for its light appeared to all humanity while its pathway was hidden from all humanity.

Augustine: Here we are with two others, walking along the road and talking to each other about the things that had been happening in Jerusalem—about the iniquity of the Jews, about the death of Christ. They were walking along, talking the matter over, grieving for him as if he were dead, not knowing he had risen again. He appeared and joined them as a third traveler, and entered into friendly conversation with them. Their eyes were held from recognizing him; their hearts, you see, needed more thorough instruction. Recognition is deferred.

Augustine: “We,” they said, “had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” O my dear disciples, you had hoped! So now you no longer hope? Look, Christ is alive! Is hope dead in you? Certainly, certainly, Christ is alive! Christ, being alive, found the hearts of his disciples dead, as he appeared and did not appear to their eyes. He was at one and the same time seen and concealed. I mean, if he wasn’t seen, how could they have heard him questioning them and answered his questions? He was walking with them along the road like a companion and was himself the leader. Of course he was seen, but he wasn’t recognized. For their eyes were restrained, as we heard, so that they wouldn’t recognize him. They weren’t restrained so that they wouldn’t see him, but they were held so that they wouldn’t recognize him

Ah yes, brothers and sisters, but where did the Lord wish to be recognized? In the breaking of bread. We're all right, nothing to worry about—we break bread, and we recognize the Lord. It was for our sake that he didn't want to be recognized anywhere but there, because we weren't going to see him in the flesh, and yet we were going to eat his flesh. So if you're a believer, any of you, if you're not called a Christian for nothing, if you don't come to church pointlessly, if you listen to the Word of God in fear and hope, you may take comfort in the breaking of bread. The Lord's absence is not an absence. Have faith, and the one you cannot see is with you. Those two, even when the Lord was talking to them, did not have faith, because they didn't believe he had risen. Nor did they have any hope that he could rise again. They had lost faith, lost hope. They were walking along, dead, with Christ alive. They were walking along, dead, with life itself. Life was walking along with them, but in their hearts life had not yet been restored.

Augustine: Recognition, though, happened only when Jesus opened up the Scriptures for them, because they had given up hope and said, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." O my dear disciples, you had hoped, now you don't hope? Come here, robber, give the disciples a lesson. Why have you given up hope, just because you have seen him crucified, because you've looked at him hanging there, because you have thought him weak? He was like that for the robber too, hanging on the cross beside him. The robber was sharing in his punishment but he believed straightaway and acknowledged him, while you on the other hand have forgotten he is the author of life. Cry out, robber, from the cross! You, a criminal, win over the saints! What did they say? "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." What did this man say? "Jesus, remember me, when you come in your kingdom." So you had hoped, had you, that it was he who would redeem Israel? O my dear disciples, if he was the one that was going to redeem Israel, it means you have defected. But he has reinstated you; he didn't abandon you. By becoming your companion on the way, he himself became for you the way.

Cyril of Alexandria: In this discourse the Lord shows that the law was necessary to make ready the way and the ministry of the prophets to prepare people for faith in this marvelous act, so that when the resurrection really took place, those who were troubled at its greatness might remember what was said of old and be induced to believe. He brings forward, therefore, Moses and the prophets, interpreting their hidden meaning and making plain to the worthy what to the unworthy was obscure. In this way he settles in them the ancient and hereditary faith taught them by the sacred books which they possessed. For

nothing which comes from God is without its use, but all have their appointed place and service. In their due place servants were sent to make ready for the presence of the Master. They brought in beforehand prophecy as the necessary preparative for faith, so that, like some royal treasure, what had been foretold might in due season be brought forward from the concealment of its former obscurity, unveiled and made plain by the clearness of the interpretation.

Augustine: All that we read in holy Scripture for our instruction and salvation demands an attentive ear. You have just heard how the eyes of those two disciples whom the Lord joined on their way were kept from recognizing him. He found them in despair of the redemption that was in Christ, supposing him now to have suffered and died as a man, not imagining him to live forever as the Son of God. So he opened to them the Scriptures and showed them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and for all things to be fulfilled that were written concerning him in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms—in short, the whole of the Old Testament. Everything in those Scriptures speaks of Christ, but only to him who has ears. He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And so let us pray that he will open our own.

Augustine: And no one should doubt that his being recognized in the breaking of bread is the sacrament, which brings us together in recognizing him. Remember, though, dearly beloved, how the Lord Jesus desired to be recognized in the breaking of bread, by those whose eyes had been kept till then from recognizing him. The faithful know what I'm talking about. They know Christ in the breaking of bread. It isn't every loaf of bread, you see, but the one that receives Christ's blessing and becomes the body of Christ. That's where they recognized him. They were overjoyed and went straight to the others. They found whom they already knew. By telling what they had seen, they added to the gospel. It was all said, all done, all written down. And it has reached us.

He blessed the bread, broke it, and they recognized him. That's how you recognize Christ—those of you who believe he is the Christ. But your graces should consider what all the disciples were like before the Lord's resurrection. I beg their pardon for saying so, but they weren't yet believers. They became great believers later on, but before that they were even inferior to us. We, I mean to say, believe that Christ has risen again, which they didn't yet believe. But afterward they saw, they touched, they went over him with eyes and hands, and in that way they believed, and their hearts were given strength from the

holy Scriptures. So they drank, they burst forth, and they filled us up too.

Ambrose: Good then is love, having wings of burning fire, that flies through the breasts and hearts of the saints and consumes whatever is material and earthly but tests whatever is pure and with its fire makes better whatever it has touched. This fire the Lord Jesus sent upon earth. Faith shone bright, devotion was enkindled, love was illuminated, and justice was resplendent. With this fire he inflamed the heart of his apostles, as Cleopas bears witness, saying, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” Therefore the wings of fire are the flames of the divine Scripture.

Augustine: Just as we are distinguished from others by faith, so let us also be distinguished by morals and by works. Let us be on fire with charity, which the demons never had. It is the fire those two also were burning with on the road. When Christ, you see, had been recognized and had left them, 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?” Burn then, in order not to burn with the fire the demons are going to burn with. Be on fire with the fervor of charity, in order to differentiate yourselves from demons. This fervor whirls you upward, takes you upward, lifts you up to heaven. Whatever vexations you suffer on earth, however much the enemy may humiliate Christian hearts and press them downward, the fervor of love seeks the heights.

John Calvin: 16. But their eyes were restrained. The Evangelist expressly states this, lest anyone should think that the aspect of Christ’s body was changed, and that the features of his countenance were different from what they had formerly been. For though Christ remained like himself, he was not recognized, because the eyes of beholders were held; and this takes away all suspicion of a phantom or false imagination. But hence we learn how great is the weakness of all our senses, since neither eyes nor ears discharge their office, unless so far as power is incessantly communicated to them from heaven. Our members do indeed possess their natural properties; but to make us more fully sensible that they are held by us at the will of another, God retains in his own hand the use of them, so that we ought ever to reckon it to be one of his daily favors, that our ears hear and our eyes see; for if he does not every hour quicken our senses, all their power will immediately give way. I readily acknowledge that our senses are not frequently held in the same manner as happened at that time, so as to make so gross a mistake about an object

presented to us; but by a single example God shows that it is in his power to direct the faculties which he has bestowed, so as to assure us that nature is subject to his will. Now if the bodily eyes, to which peculiarly belongs the power of seeing, are held, whenever it pleases the Lord, so as not to perceive the objects presented to them, our understandings would possess no greater acuteness, even though their original condition remained unimpaired; but no in this wretched corruption, after having been deprived of their light, they are liable to innumerable deceptions, and are sunk into such gross stupidity, that they can do nothing but commit mistakes, as happens to us incessantly. The proper discrimination between truth and falsehood, therefore, does not arise from the sagacity of our own mind, but comes to us from the Spirit of wisdom. But it is chiefly in the contemplation of heavenly things that our stupidity is discovered; for not only do we imagine false appearances to be true, but we turn the clear light into darkness.

27. And beginning at Moses. This passage shows us in what manner Christ is made known to us through the Gospel. It is when light is thrown on the knowledge of him by the Law and the Prophets. For never was there a more able or skillful teacher of the Gospel than our Lord himself; and we see that he borrows from the Law and the Prophets the proof of his doctrine. If it be objected that he began with easy lessons, that the disciples might gradually dismiss the Prophets, and pass on to the perfect Gospel, this conjecture is easily refuted; for we shall afterwards find it stated, that all the apostles had their understanding opened, not to be wise without the assistance of the Law, but to understand the Scriptures. In order that Christ may be made known to us through the Gospel, it is therefore necessary that Moses and the Prophets should go before as guides, to show us the way. It is necessary to remind readers of this, that they may not lend an ear to fanatics, who, by suppressing the Law and the Prophets, wickedly mutilate the Gospel; as if God intended that any testimony which he has ever given respecting his Son should become useless.

32. Did not our heart burn within us? Their recognition of Christ led the disciples to a lively perception of the secret and hidden grace of the Spirit, which he had formerly bestowed upon them. For God sometimes works in his people in such a manner, that for a time they are not aware of the power of the Spirit, (of which, however, they are not destitute,) or, at least, that they do not perceive it distinctly, but only feel it by a secret movement. Thus the disciples had formerly indeed felt an ardor, which they now remember, but which they had not then observed: now that Christ has made himself known to them, they at

length begin to consider the grace which they had formerly, as it were, swallowed without tasting it, and perceive that they were stupid. For they accuse themselves of indifference, as if they had said, "How did it happen that we did not recognize him while he was talking? for when he penetrated into our hearts, we ought to have perceived who he was." But they conclude that he is Christ, not simply from the bare sign that his word was efficacious to inflame their hearts, but because they ascribe to him the honor which belongs to him, that when he speaks with the mouth, he likewise inflames their hearts inwardly by the warmth of his Spirit.

33. And they arose in the same hour. The circumstance of the time, and the distance of the places, show with what ardor those two men turned to convey the intelligence to their fellow-disciples. As they entered a lodging towards evening, it is probable that the Lord had not made himself known to them before night came on. To perform a journey of three hours in the dead of night was exceedingly inconvenient; yet they rise that very instant, and return in haste to Jerusalem. And, indeed, if they had only gone thither next day, their tardiness might have exposed them to suspicion; but as they chose rather to deprive themselves of the repose of the night than to allow the slightest delay in making the apostles partakers of their joy, the very haste gave additional credit to their narrative. Now when Luke says that they arose in the same hour, it is probable that they came to the disciples about midnight. But, according to the testimony of the same Luke, the disciples were at that time conversing together; and hence we learn their anxiety, and industry, and ardor, in spending almost the whole night without sleep, and unceasingly making inquiries at each other, until the resurrection of Christ was ascertained by a multitude of testimonies.

34. Saying, The Lord is actually risen. By these words Luke means that those persons who had brought to the apostles joyful intelligence to confirm their minds, were informed by the disciples respecting another appearance. Nor can it be doubted that this mutual confirmation was the reward which God bestowed on them for their holy diligence. By a comparison of the time, we may conclude that Peter, after having returned from the sepulcher, was in a state of great perplexity and uncertainty, until Christ showed himself to him, and that, on the very day that he had visited the sepulcher, he obtained his wish. Hence arose that mutual congratulation among the eleven, that there was now no reason to doubt, because the Lord had appeared to Simon.