

“Returning To The Scene Of The Battle”

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Luke 24:13-35 = the eyes of faith

Remember that minor but powerful scene in the award-winning movie *Patton*? General Patton and his staff are travelling in North Africa. Patton suddenly has the caravan pull off at a fork in the road. As if in a daze, he seems lost in thought.



Known for being decisive, Patton shouldn't be having a problem with such a simple choice. An aid urges, “the battle's this way” pointing to the left. “No” says Patton, “the battle's this other way.” So they take a detour down the road less travelled.

It was indeed a battlefield but an ancient one. Down that narrow



road, they come to an historic battlefield, now overgrown and fallow. This was the very place where the once mighty army of Carthage had made its last stand, decisively and utterly defeated by the Romans in the carnage of the

Battle of Zama. A critical victory for Rome, it ensured the emergence of the fledgling Roman Empire over its chief competitor. That one battle was the most important in Roman history.

Patton insisted that he had been there in a different life, at that ancient battle 2300 years ago. Patton was drawn to a battle scene like a moth to a flame. You might call it a sixth sense or second sight. You might even call it faith.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had a similar *deja-vu* all over again experience. You see, Emmaus had also been the site of a major battle in a long-ago war. Almost exactly 200 years before, Emmaus had been the scene of a great battle in a war of liberation. That battle had been the decisive one, the final victory where the Maccabees had led the Israelites to freedom.





The two disciples fleeing to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus, did not know him even in intimate discussion, did not comprehend the significance of his words. That is, until he broke bread with them, and in that action, just days after the identical action at the last supper in the upper room, their eyes were opened.

As if suddenly they had been gifted with a sixth sense ~ a sense like General Patton as depicted in the movie. You might call it a sixth sense. You might call it second sight. You might well call it eyes of faith. God gave those disciples miraculous sight, insight, and they recognized Jesus.



For the recognition of Jesus, why did God choose the scene of a revolutionary victory precisely 200 years before? Why choose a place where the Jews had thrown off the yoke of oppression? Why a battlefield nearly contemporaneous with the one Patton visited in North Africa where Carthage had fallen to Rome?

Luke is the most revolutionary of all the Gospels. The whole of Luke and Acts is addressed to the pagan Roman Empire, to a Theophilus, Latin for “friend of God,” probably not a real person but a symbol. Luke’s purpose was to assure Roman authorities that Jesus and Christianity were no threat to Rome, that the radicality of Jesus’ Gospel is otherworldly and transcends mere politics.



This scene of two disciples returning to that battlefield represents a scene that would be understood by their contemporaries as a search for revolutionary clarity. Cleopas spoke eloquently about Jesus. Then he said, listen carefully: **“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”**

‘Redeem’ in the parlance of the day meant to liberate.

Some of the disciples had been expecting Jesus to lead an armed insurrection. For these Zealots, the Messiah was to bring an army to overthrow Rome as Judas Maccabeus had overthrown the Greeks 200 years before in the Battle of Emmaus. Yet this Jesus revolution must

have gone desperately wrong in the eyes of these two disciples ~ the Messiah had been captured, falsely tried and killed before the kingdom could be consummated.

Jesus' answer: Jesus explained that redemption had indeed already come ~ liberation fulfilled, redemption far deeper, far more permanent, far more comprehensive than any violent political revolution could ever accomplish. A kingdom had come more profound than any worldly kingdom. God's kingdom had indeed been consummated ~ in the suffering and death of God's anointed one.

As John Howard Yoder has said it so clearly:

"The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; [the cross] is the kingdom come."



Liberation has come in a form far more radical than these disciples could comprehend. Liberation not just from the perception of oppression but from radically real oppression, from spiritual, physical and political oppression ~ from depression and despair, from want and deprivation, from the pain and suffering persons inflict on other persons ~ all because the reign of God, the beloved community of the Risen One has arrived. Within its borders these evils no longer exist.

This battle was not the only meaning which had attached itself to the village of Emmaus. Emmaus has an even deeper back history. A thousand years before the battle of Emmaus and 1200 years before the disciples met Jesus on that road, Emmaus had been the place of another visitation. It was widely held in Jesus' day that Emmaus marked the spot where fleeing from his brother Esau, Jacob had laid his head on a stone and dreamed of angels ascending and descending.²



Yet again we see Emmaus as a place where God was perceived beyond perception, seen beyond sight. Jacob entered an altered state of consciousness and was gifted with the opportunity to become a new person, a different person, a better person than the con-man and fugitive he was when he laid his

head down on that rock. Emmaus is a place where radically new personhood is offered.

This can happen. This does happen. This same opportunity is for us offered on the road to Emmaus through a simple shift in perspective.

In the 1945 film, *The Enchanted Cottage*, starring Dorothy McGuire and Robert Young, she was tragically plain and he has been disfigured in an accident. They meet when he is convalescing where she works as a maid. Two broken spirits they both believe themselves too flawed to hope for more.



Surprisingly despite such a poor reason to marry, they actually do come to love each other. After professing their love for each other they are transformed. She is radiantly beautiful, his features restored ~ but only in their own eyes. Outsiders still see them as ugly and deformed.



The only friend they have is one who takes them on faith, the blind neighbor who judges them not by the appearances he cannot see but by the qualities they exhibit which he can perceive ~ qualities of self-confidence, joy and love. By these standards the couple is indeed beautiful. Blind eyes are actually

open to true reality beyond visual perception.

Sort of like, kind of like perceiving Jesus in breaking bread.

Today's insight is that for us 2000 years later, we don't have to return to Jacob's rough campsite or some ancient battlefield to be able to comprehend that the Gospel is far more radical than we are able to imagine!



Let our eyes be opened ~ open to how radical God's gospel really is. Open to how the cross is God's liberating moment, the kingdom fulfilled. Open to how the worst implement of execution ever created, is paradoxically the conduit through which God's love passes. Open

to how the cross can transform us into the beautiful, loving and lovely, graceful and grace-filled, faithful, radical creatures God intends each of us to be.

May our eyes be opened ~ opened to God's active engagement in our lives ~ eyes opened in the breaking of bread.

¹ John Howard Yoder from *The Politics of Jesus*, p. 51. Also supported by the extensive discussion on cross and kingdom in N. T. Wright's *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*

² Genesis 28:10-19 . As for the Lukan identification of Emmaus with the place Jacob slept, cf. under heading "Symbolic identification" in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmaus>