

1 Peter 1 :3-9

**Luke 24:13-35, focused on verses 21b-24
from The Message**

March 20, 2022

Third Sunday of Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

AMAZED, ASTOUNDED, SURPRISED, AND CONFUSED

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Sunday, October 8, 1871, Rev. Dwight L. Moody was wrapping up his sermon at the evening service. Suddenly, the city fire bell started clanging. This was a common occurrence, but it turned out to be a most uncommon fire. Today we know it as The Great Chicago Fire and remember the tale about Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicking over a lantern in the barn to start the inferno. But The Great Fire of 1871 was incredibly destructive. When it finally ended on October 10, the losses were staggering: 17,000 structures destroyed; 100,000 people left homeless; an estimated 300 people killed; and \$200 million in damages in 1871 dollars (adjusted for inflation, \$4 billion dollars today).

Rev. Moody's first reaction was to look for his family, which he located and moved to a safe place. Then he and his wife went to the North side of Chicago and stayed there to help other people. Much of what D.L. Moody had worked so hard to achieve in his ministry was destroyed, at least in terms of physical property.

Imagine Dwight L. Moody and his wife walking on a charred and ash filled road to North Chicago amid the ruins of The Great Fire. Imagine them talking about all of the things that had happened during the three days from October 8-10. Imagine Jesus suddenly appearing to walk alongside them, unrecognized, and asking them, "What are you talking about as you walk along?" Imagine Mr. and Mrs. Moody standing still and looking sad. Imagine Rev. Moody asking, "Are you the only stranger in Chicago who doesn't know the things that have happened here in the last three days?" Imagine Jesus asking them, "What things?"

If someone had told D.L. Moody on the afternoon of October 10, 1871 that he would soon travel across the country and around the world preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and that within a dozen years the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago would be founded, flourish, and continue to this day, he probably would have had a hard time believing it, even though one of his most famous quotations is, "God never made a promise

that was too good to be true.” I imagine that on the afternoon of October 10, 1871, Dwight L. Moody, his wife, and many other faithful Christians, no matter how strong their faith, must have been amazed, astounded, surprised, and confused.

We know what it means to say that something is “too good to be true.” We even have a more realistic, pragmatic, maybe even pessimistic variation – “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” Here’s one definition of “too good to be true” – “If you say something seems too good to be true, you are suspicious of it because it seems better than you had expected, and you think there may be something wrong with it that you have not noticed.” Other definitions take it a step further: “so good that it is hard to believe; so exciting or pleasing as to be unbelievable; so excellent that it defies belief.”

Isn’t the opposite also true? Can’t something be “too bad to be true”? When you get the unexpected bad news that your loved one has died, you say, “I can’t believe it’s true!” When the planes hit the Twin Towers, we said, “I can’t believe it’s true!” When we started reading reports and seeing pictures of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, we said, “I can’t believe it’s true!”

We know what it’s like to hear something so bad we can’t believe that it’s true. We know what it’s like to hear something so good we can’t believe that it’s true. So, we can better understand how Cleopas and his companion must have felt on the Emmaus Road that first Easter Sunday afternoon as they talked to the stranger who asked, “What things?”

First, they told him the things that were so awful they couldn’t believe they were true. . . “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel.” (Luke 24:19-21a, *The Message*) No wonder Cleopas and his companion stood still, looking like they had lost their best friend. They couldn’t believe the bad things that had happened to their friend, the one they thought was going to save them. “But we had hoped . . .”

But, then, Cleopas and his companion told the stranger about the good things they had heard about that seemed too good to be true. “And it is now the third day since it happened. But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn’t find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn’t see Jesus. . .” (Luke 24:21b-24, *The Message*)

Each week during the season of Lent, we are hearing Luke's story of the Emmaus Road experience from a different version of the Bible. Today I read from Eugene Peterson's translation called *The Message*. The blurb for *The Message* on amazon.com says "*The Message* combines the authority of God's Word with the cadence and energy of conversational English." That is the reason for most "new" translations and versions of the Bible. It is said that William Tyndale, who was executed for his translation of the Old and New Testaments into the English language in the 16th century, explained his reason for his translations, "so that the boy that driveth the plough" could read the scriptures in his own language.

Many English translations of the Emmaus Road story have Cleopas and his companion say to Jesus, "Some women of our group **astounded** us. I'm fascinated by the way *The Message* puts it: "But now some of our women have completely **confused** us . . ." But, just think about that: no matter how much Cleopas and his companion might have wished for things to be different that Sunday afternoon, all of the evidence and circumstances pointed to the obvious – Jesus was dead and so were their hopes. An empty tomb? An angelic vision? He's alive? No wonder they were confused. It must have sounded too good to be true.

That word, usually translated "amazed," comes from a Greek verb that quite literally means "outside of oneself." As one biblical scholar puts it, "It means to be amazed, astonished, or astounded describing 'the feeling of astonishment mingled with fear, caused by events which are miraculous, extraordinary, or difficult to understand.' It can describe one who is so astonished almost to the point of failing to comprehend what one has experienced."

"Our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. And we had our hopes up . . ." That was reality for Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus that Sunday afternoon. "Early this morning they were at the tomb and couldn't find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive." That was also reality, but not yet for Cleopas and his companion, even though the risen Lord was right there with them, walking with them and talking with them. No wonder they were amazed, astounded, surprised, and confused all at the same time.

In the *Layman's Bible Commentary* series from the 1960's, which some of you might have used when you taught Sunday School, Donald G. Miller muses about why Cleopas and his companion must have been amazed, astounded, surprised, and confused. He writes, "Nevertheless, perplexing things had taken place; namely the body had disappeared from

the tomb. Some women had reported a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. Investigation confirmed the fact of the empty tomb, but gave no evidence that Jesus was living. If he were alive, would he have remained absent from his disciples?"¹ Another Bible commentator says much the same thing, only he puts the words into those two travelers' mouths: "And we were confident that he would rescue Israel. But after everything that's happened in Jerusalem, and now it being far into the third day – well, we just don't know."²

As we walk along the road through this Lenten season, we are talking about all the things that are happening: the ongoing pandemic and the concern about another surge; the horror unfolding in Ukraine and the fear the war may escalate beyond those borders into NATO countries; the rising prices that are costing us more at the gas pump and the grocery store; the realization that things have changed quite a bit since March 2020 and wondering what's ahead of us on the road. Yes, we're talking about all these things that have happened, are happening, and what might happen.

And we walk along the road through this Lenten season as people who say we believe: we believe God has never made a promise too good to be true; we believe the good news that Jesus is alive; we believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. That's what we **say** we believe, but how often do we walk the road thinking all of that good news is just too good to believe? How often do we look at the circumstances of life and think they are the ultimate reality of life? And, even if we really believe that God has never made a promise too good to be true, how often do we take it for granted? How often do we fail to live into God's promise? How often are we no longer amazed, astounded, surprised, and, yes, even confused when we hear the good news, "He is alive!"?

Around the time D.L. Moody was rededicating himself to the gospel ministry and rebuilding from the ashes of The Great Chicago Fire, Fannie Kennish wrote the hymn "The Walk to Emmaus." Although her hymn is almost 150 years old and based on Luke's story that is 2,000 years old, it can still speak to us today as we make our way through this life and find ourselves again and again on the Emmaus Road, feeling so often just as Cleopas and his companion did on another Sunday afternoon.

*Lo, two of the Lord's disciples walked side by side,
and talked of the dear, dead Master, The Crucified.
They spake with the passing stranger, who walked alone;
Nor heard in the words of comfort, The Master's tone.
So, oft in the waning twilight, One passeth by;
His voice rings out thro' the darkness, Lo, it is I.*

*And thus in the hush of evening they sat at meat,
He brake of the bread and blessed it, Said, Take and eat.
The eyes that were dim with weeping, flashed bright and clear;
the hearts that had mourned sang gladly, the Lord is here.
So, oft in the waning twilight, One passeth by;
His voice rings out thro' the darkness, Lo, it is I.*

*So wait we in pain and sorrow, in bitter tears,
and talk of the deep'ning shadows and gloomy fears.
We mourn for the bleeding Savior, The Crucified;
Nor know 'tis the dear Lord walking close by our side.
So, oft in the waning twilight, One passeth by;
His voice rings out thro' the darkness, Lo, it is I.*

Let us pray: God of all times and places, may we have faith to obey your call, go out into the unknown, joyfully serve you in newness of life, faithfully walk in your holy ways, and follow you with courage, for the sake of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Donald G. Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary, Vol. 18, The Gospel According to Luke* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), p 171.

²Frederick Danker, *Luke (Proclamation Commentaries)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 11.