



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Greatest Bible Study Ever

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 18, 2018

Setting the Stage

THE TIME

Easter Sunday afternoon nearly 2,000 years ago

THE PLACE

A busy road running about seven miles from the capital city of Jerusalem to a suburb called Emmaus

THE CHARACTERS

Two men (we'll call them Cleo and Fred) who had been among the extended circle of followers and supporters of the controversial figure Jesus of Nazareth

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

Cleo and Fred had spent the past weekend in Jerusalem, along with a few hundred thousand of their closest friends, for the biggest event of the annual calendar: the Passover. They had probably been in Jerusalem for this celebration every year of their entire lives, but there had never been a Passover like this one. The whole city was in a convulsive uproar about the shocking events of the past week, including the unsubstantiated rumors spreading that very day about an inexplicable empty tomb.

THE ACTION

The two men are traveling home by foot; they apparently didn't own horses ... and bicycles, cars, buses and Uber hadn't been invented yet. This was their first opportunity to return to their families, as travel was frowned upon for all Jews on Saturday, their Sabbath day. We pick up the action in Luke 24:13.

That same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. ¹⁵As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. ¹⁶But God kept them from recognizing him.

¹⁷He asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. ¹⁸Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days."

¹⁹"What things?" Jesus asked.

"The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth," they said. "He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people. ²⁰But our leading priests and other religious leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and they crucified him. ²¹We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel. This all happened three days ago.

²²"Then some women from our group of his followers were at his tomb early this morning, and they came back with an amazing report. ²³They said his body was missing, and they had seen angels who told them Jesus is alive! ²⁴Some of our men ran out to see, and sure enough, his body was gone, just as the women had said."

²⁵Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. ²⁶Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?" ²⁷Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

²⁸By this time they were nearing Emmaus and the end of their journey. Jesus acted as if he were going on, ²⁹but they

begged him, “Stay the night with us, since it is getting late.” So he went home with them. ³⁰As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. ³¹Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

³²They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” ³³And within the hour they were on their way back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven disciples and the others who had gathered with them, ³⁴who said, “The Lord has really risen! He appeared to Peter.”

³⁵Then the two from Emmaus told their story of how Jesus had appeared to them as they were walking along the road, and how they had recognized him as he was breaking the bread.

Luke 24:13-25

Studying the Greatest Book

Last week I talked to you about what I believe to be the “greatest word in the Bible.” Today, following a similar theme, I’m talking about “The Greatest Bible Study Ever.” We’ll be thinking about that activity which is at the very nucleus of the life of this church and many churches: studying the Greatest Book of all time. We study it through the brief messages of the pastors each worship service. We provide large-group and small-group study opportunities throughout the week. We offer a Christian bookstore, loaded with excellent guides to studying the Bible, and also fresh new translations of the Bible to make it come alive in modern language.

And our church is not unique. Followers of Christ everywhere are drawn to this book. News reports have been circulated since the Super Bowl that about half of the players on the NFL world champion Eagles team met every Thursday afternoon following practice throughout the season to do a Bible study together—and all indications are that doing so had a profound spiritual impact upon those men and their camaraderie as teammates.

What is this Great Book? It's actually not just a single book but a library, consisting of 66 different books, written by at least 40 different authors, over a span of nearly 1,500 years. And yet, for all its diversity, it has an amazing unity and internal consistency and concentrated impact.

One might even wonder if some Higher Power had guided the various writers, so that their individual contributions were all orchestrated and coordinated together without any of them completely understanding the whole. Actually, that is what happened! This is uniquely God's book, inspired and directed by Him like no other book.

The Bible, filled with history and poetry and drama, with philosophy and practical wisdom and predictions of the future, is incredibly rich and nuanced. You can study it your entire life and learn something new in it every day. But it's not a simplistic book. And it takes work and thought and careful attention to understand it. It's not a comic book or a cheap novel or a *USA TODAY* article in a newspaper or website, to be read quickly and then tossed aside. It's deep. And that's why nearly all of us find that we can use some help to explore and grasp it. That help can come from gifted writers, or from trained teachers, or from discussing a portion of scripture together with friends—where we can learn from our peers and process the truth within a community of believers.

We don't need to be embarrassed or apologetic about receiving help to understand this book. My senior year in high school I took Advanced Biology. I really struggled at first to grasp what the textbook was describing. But fortunately I had a dedicated and passionate teacher who loved biology, and who made it interesting and understandable to me. When I couldn't make heads or tails out of the concepts of DNA and genetics and cell reproduction, he helped me to grasp it at a level I could comprehend. We all need teachers sometimes, to help us see things we otherwise would miss.

Some adults are reluctant to participate in a Bible study because they are afraid of being embarrassed, of not knowing as much as other

people. But we all have to start somewhere. And if learning the Bible hasn't been part of your life's experience up to now, it's never too late to start. After all, the human brain never stops growing. We can all be life-long learners.

In a rather screwball comedy film from the mid-1980s, Rodney Dangerfield starred in "Back to School." Rodney was a multi-millionaire entrepreneur who had a lingering feeling of inferiority because he had never gone to college. When his youngest son enrolled at the university as a freshman, Rodney decided to join him, going back to school at the age of 50. It was tough going at first. He looked and felt like a "fish out of water." But then he began to learn, and it was exciting and energizing—and at times hilarious.

No matter your age or mine, we, too, can go "back to school" in learning about the Greatest Book and discover the excitement of these pages coming alive to us.

A Walk with the Author

Let's return to our friends Cleo and Fred during their walk home. The mysterious stranger (whom they were supernaturally prevented from recognizing during that two-hour conversation) helped them to discover what they had previously been unable to see. All the Jews of their time were people of the Book. It was the centerpiece of their national and cultural life. They read it as their first primer when they were in kindergarten. They memorized great portions of it. Their minds weren't cluttered by the vast amount of information that bombards our brains—books, internet, TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, email. Instead, they had the Bible. We might assume, then, that the Palestinian Jews of the first century were all scholars of scripture.

But there were significant portions of their Bible (what we call today the Old Testament) that they read but didn't understand. They all had a glimmer of hope that God had something big in store, and that one day He would send a Messiah, and that somehow that would make everything different. But in spite of all the clues scattered

throughout the Old Testament text, not even the professors and clergy had figured it all out. **Until this day.**

What happened here in Luke 24 is what I call “the Greatest Bible Study Ever.” And here’s why. Jesus Himself, the very Messiah whom the writers of the Old Testament had been guided to write about, had now come. And just that morning He had completed the great work He had come to do: encompassed by His crucifixion and then His resurrection. Now, at last, He could explain how He was the fulfillment of all the prophecies and predictions. Since He was God Himself in the flesh, and since God was the One who guided and inspired the writing of the ancient prophecies, we could truly say that in this Greatest Bible Study Ever it is the Author Himself who is explaining His book.

In the film “Back to School,” that’s what Rodney Dangerfield did. In his modern literature class he was struggling to make sense of the novels of author Kurt Vonnegut. So he arranged to hire the author himself to come to campus and explain his books. Imagine the shock on the face of Rodney’s dorm roommate when he answered the door and a man with a bushy mustache said “Hi, I’m Kurt Vonnegut.” If you want to understand a book, who better to ask than the author himself? And that is what our friends Cleo and Fred get to do, without initially realizing it. The Author of the Bible Himself is explaining His book to them. How I would have loved to have eavesdropped on that Bible study!

A Memorable Meal

The story ends in a surprising way. This amazing Bible study is so fascinating that Cleo and Fred don’t want it to end, so they beg their traveling companion to stay for dinner. And when the table is set, Jesus takes bread and breaks it and hands it to them—just as He did three days earlier in an upstairs dining room in Jerusalem, when He told His closest companions to “do this in remembrance of Me,” and that it would represent His body and blood. Let’s read again verses 30 and 31:

As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared!

It is probable that Cleo and Fred were not physically present to witness the first Communion, though they may have heard about it from the 11 disciples who were there. My own hunch is that what caused them to have their “aha moment” of recognition was **not** the breaking of the loaf, but the **nail holes** through His hands when Jesus extended the bread to them. That would have been an eye-opener beyond any other.

Today is our Communion Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent. It is a time when we re-enact that original breaking-of-the-bread and passing-of-the-cup. In the so-called Upper Room on that fateful Thursday night Jesus served His disciples for the final time before His crucifixion. And then in Luke 24, he served His disciples for the first time after his resurrection. In both cases, eyes were opened to see Him for who He really is.

This Sacrament continues to be an eye-opener for people today. As we partake, let’s allow our eyes to be opened to see Jesus. He is right here among us ... not in a physical form, except through the representation of His body in the bread and cup. But because He is risen from the dead, victor over the grave, and with His divine power to be everywhere at once, we can claim His presence with you and me—now, and when we depart from here, and every moment of our lives. Open your eyes to see Him.

