

What A Difference A Day Makes..!

by Ron R. Ritchie

A few years ago there was a popular song out called, "What A Difference A Day Makes_24 Little Hours." I was a disc jockey then, and I remember playing that record a lot. Like all popular songs, however, it quickly passed into my memory bank. Now I hear it only in my mind, and then only in times of national crisis. I hear it after the assassinations of political, social and religious leaders whose only "crime" was a desire to change society for the good. But lurking in the background was an assassin who did not care for their philosophy, their hopes and dreams.

These assassinated leaders wanted to bring peace where there was war, justice where there was injustice, prosperity where there was poverty, hope where there was despair, life where there was death. What a difference a day made to the hopes and dreams of the followers of the Abraham Lincolns and the Mahatma Ghandis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Anwar Sadats, and, most recently, the John Lennons. As these men sought to teach and share their hopes, assassins' bullets claimed their short lives. All died, we would say, untimely deaths, their work unfinished. Their followers wept during the funeral processions, mourning with a sense of hopelessness and aimlessness as their heroes were laid in their tombs. There they yet lie, taken from the scene of human history, except in the memory of their faithful followers. What a difference a day made to them, 24 little hours, and they were plunged into despair and hopelessness.

At this time of year I cannot help but contrast the life and death of those political, social and religious leaders with the life and death of Jesus Christ. During his short life of only 33 years_he came upon the world scene when he was 30, the one of whom John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"--the hearts of the Jewish people were filled with the hope that he was the Messiah. Here was the one who would bring love, joy and peace, and finally, the kingdom of righteousness, where peace would prevail forever.

But Jesus' life was cut short. Some religious leaders in Israel decided they did not like his message of righteousness. They did not like the way he was drawing the crowds. They did not like his attack upon their self- righteousness. Indirectly, they planned to assassinate him, using the Roman government and courts. The first charge they brought against him was blasphemy, a religious charge, because he said he was the Son of God. The second charge was treason, for, in response to Pilate's question, "Are you the king they say you are?" he replied, "You said it." He had convicted himself.

He was brought to trial on a Thursday night. He was mocked, beaten and spat upon. By 12 o'clock noon on Friday they had him nailed to a cross. In three hours he was dead. His brokenhearted followers took down from the cross this man they had loved and followed. They had stood in wonder at his actions among them, the love he shared, the message he brought. They took their dead leader and laid him in a borrowed tomb. Then they went away, each to his own home, brokenhearted. What a difference a day had made in their lives.

The next day was the Sabbath. In the synagogue, his disciples must have prayed, their hearts overcome with grief, their hopes and dreams shattered. Some women who were his followers had collected perfume to anoint the body of Jesus when the Sabbath had ended; perfume to keep away the smell of death. What a difference a day makes.

The following day was Sunday. What a difference this day would make in the lives of the apostles, in the lives of the women who went to the tomb, and in the lives of all who would later follow the disciples. What a difference this one day would make in our lives today.

In chapter 24 of Luke's gospel there is described one day, a Sunday of 24 hours. Here we get a picture of the emotions and actions of the followers of Jesus Christ over a period of twelve hours. We have illustrated for us a sense of their enlightenment, a slow dawning of the reality they are going to face. It is a fascinating story that has much to teach us.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

1. Early Dawn (Luke 24:1 - 12)

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it happened that while they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling apparel; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." And they remembered His words, and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. And these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. (But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at that which had happened.)

It is early dawn. The women have gotten up early to go to the tomb--Mary Magdalene, the woman who had seven demons cast out of her, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James. These women had followed Jesus, helping out of their substance to promote his ministry. When they arrived at the tomb, however, they found it empty. The stone had been rolled away, and they saw only the grave clothes. As they surveyed the tomb, perplexed, they saw two angels dressed in dazzling white. The angels said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here for he has risen. Remember how he spoke to you while he was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise again?" The angels were actually rebuking the women. They were saying, "He told you many times that he must be crucified but on the third day he would rise again from the dead. What are you doing here? It's the third day. Did you expect to find the living in a graveyard?"

The women ran back to the disciples and shared excitedly with them this great news: "He has risen from the dead. He is risen like he said he would." The men, logical beings that they were, said, "Nonsense. Wives' tales. Foolishness. Silly women." But Peter (and other passages say John also) ran to the tomb to check out the women's story. They were probably thinking, "It's not very logical, but they are our sisters. We ought to placate them." The men looked into the tomb and saw only the linen wrappings lying there. Peter went to his home, marveling over what had taken place. He did not understand. He had some problems with it, despite the testimony of the women and the testimony of the empty tomb. What a difference a day is making.

The scene now shifts to early afternoon.

What do you do when your leader dies?

2. Early Afternoon (24:13-24)

And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they were conversing with each other about all these things which had taken place. And it came about that while they were conversing and discussing, Jesus Himself approached, and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. And one of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have

happened here in these days?"

Two of the disciples are having a problem with believing the story. In this they are like the followers of any other assassinated leader. What do you do when your leader dies? These two decided to take a walk to Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. As they are walking, they are discussing the events that had occurred. Perhaps they are saying, "If Jesus had only run from the garden, what a different day that would have been. If Jesus had not said to Pilate, 'You said it.' But, of course, we ran too. We all left him. We couldn't even help him when we wanted to. If, if . . ."

While they are talking, the Lord appeared to them, but he prevented them from seeing who he was. I believe he did that so he could teach them who they were, so they could see how much they needed him and how much he could teach them.

That is the point of teaching which Jesus will take up with them in a few minutes.

How often do we get caught up in the grief of life, not understanding what God is doing. We hear the truth, but the eyes of our heart are not enlightened. We don't understand so we settle for the physical or the historical interpretation of what is going on in our lives, never seeing beyond that to the spiritual realm.

Jesus will now quietly begin to work on these two disciples to get them to see who he is. "What has been happening in Jerusalem," he asks them. They say, "Are you serious? You don't know what's going on? It's hard to believe that. Well, to begin, there are three things we would like to share with you. First, stranger, we want to tell you about the prophet who was." Verses 19-20:

And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him.

"First, we'd like to tell you about Jesus. There were many Jesuses, but the one we want to talk about is the one who lived in Nazareth, up north. Second, he was a prophet who was, past tense. He was a mighty man of God who made the Scripture shine forth so that we understood who God was, who we were, and what God wanted of us. It was always an exciting adventure to be with him. But, unfortunately, he is the prophet who was."

They continued, "Once we even thought he might be the prophet Moses talks about in Deuteronomy. He was mighty in deeds. My, the good works he did among us! He was the one of whom John the Baptist, through his disciples, asked, 'Are you the one we should look for or is there someone else?' Jesus replied to that question, 'Go tell John that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.' And this prophet was mighty in speech too. Why, he talked like one who had authority, not like the scribes who are always quoting somebody else. And he was mighty in the sight of God. Twice we heard the Father say from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' The people loved him, but the supreme court delivered him up to the sentence of death. They crucified a good man, a prophet. Our dreams have been shattered."

The disciples viewed the cross as a failure: "He almost made it, but he failed. He got caught on two stupid charges and they nailed him to a cross."

Writing about the crucifixion, Ralph Earle says:

True, it was the world's blackest hour, but also the world's brightest hour. It was the blackest hour because human hatred came to its fiercest focus. It was the brightest hour because divine love came to its fullest flower. At Calvary, hate was seen in all of its heinous horror, but there also love revealed the heart of God. Calvary stands at the crossroads of human history. At the cross, all the sins of the ages were placed on the heart of the sinless Son of God, as he became the representative of all humanity. From the cross salvation flows to every believing soul. This is the gospel, the greatest good news the world had ever heard.

And these disciples missed it.

Next, the two disciples shared with Jesus their broken dreams. Verse 21:

But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened.

"We thought that this man whom we followed for three years would redeem us from the yoke of Rome, like God redeemed Israel from Egypt, from the Canaanites, from the Philistines and the Babylonians. We were hoping he would bring in his kingdom and we would live like we were designed to live, to be the salt and light, the true vine of the whole world. But our hopes were shattered three days ago. If he was the prophet, the Messiah, if he was the Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and if he was going to rise again from the dead, where is he? It's already been three days." Now let us tell you about the empty tomb," they said.

Verses 22-24:

"But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also . . . had said; but Him they did not see."

They said, "We left Jerusalem because we didn't know what to make of these events. We've been so very sad about it ever since. Our dear friend Jesus is no longer among the living. "

The disciples could not see beyond the physical circumstances; they could not see the reality of what God was trying to teach them for three years, that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Jesus had told them over and over again that he had come to suffer and die and then rise again. They could not see that the cross cancelled the sin, the guilt and the shame of humanity forever. But thanks be to God for the empty tomb! Our hearts should be filled with praise and thanksgiving because of it, for without the resurrection the crucifixion would have been in vain. It is the resurrection that validates the atoning death of Jesus. It is the resurrection that proves that Jesus' death for our sins has been accepted by God the Father. The physical resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without it there would be no forgiveness of our sins and no salvation; there would be no hope now, no hope later, no life now, no life later, a life which he had promised would be filled with joy, peace and righteousness. The great joy of Easter is that Jesus rose from the dead.

I was raised in a faith that believed in mourning over death. I remember several years ago when my mother died. I arrived in Pennsylvania from Texas for the funeral on an Alfred Hitchcock-type day, a day of wind and hail and thunder and lightning, a day when the skies were black with crows crying out in the rain. My relatives, who were dressed in black, met me and we drove to the funeral home in a black--car cortege amidst the thunder and the lightning, the rain and the crows. At the funeral home the people dressed in black sat by my mother's open casket. But over to one side was a group wearing bright-colored clothes, talking animatedly, touching one another and even laughing quietly now and then. My little Italian Aunt Mary said, "Ronnie, what is going on over there? Don't they have any respect for the dead? Is there no dignity left? Are they making mockery of your mother?" "No, Aunt Mary," I said. "They are not making mockery of my mother. My mother is not here, she is risen to be with her resurrected Lord. Those people are rejoicing over the resurrection of my mother."

For Christians, death is not a time of mourning, but of joy. We mourn for our dear ones who have died because we loved them, and now we miss them. But I am convinced from the Scriptures that if we were to ask them, "Do you want to come back and be with us again?" they would say, "Are you serious? I like you, but...leave the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, leave my new body, leave where I no longer weep, where I no longer get sick, where I can eat and eat and eat and never have to go on a diet? Come back? No." My Aunt Mary spent the rest of her life mourning. What a waste.

The resurrected Lord listened to his disciples, trapped in their blindness, their grief, their perplexity and their incredible unbelief. Then he moved them from the physical events to a higher spiritual plane, a plane of reality, and exposed them again to the truth written by the prophets concerning his suffering and glory. What a difference this day is making.

The Disciples Skipped the Suffering And Went Right To The Glory

We are now moving into late afternoon on this Sunday.

3. Late Afternoon (24:25-27)

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Jesus is saying, "You don't understand. Your hearts were not open to believe me when I told you who I was. I am the Son of God, but you missed out when you didn't see that the Messiah must first suffer and then enter his glory. You skipped over the suffering and went right to the glory. For the remainder of our walk together I am going to take the Scriptures and explain to you my place in all of them so that you will understand."

"Do you remember where Exodus talks about the Passover Lamb? I am that Passover Lamb. Do you remember where Leviticus talks about the Atoning Sacrifice? I am that Sacrifice. I am the Smitten Rock in Numbers; I am the Prophet to Come in Deuteronomy; I am the Sheep that is led to slaughter in Isaiah; I am the Savior in Obadiah; I am the Anointed One in Habakkuk; I am the Mighty One to save in Zephaniah; concerning the glory to come, I am the Branch of Righteousness in Jeremiah; I am the Plant of Renown in Ezekiel; I am the Stone that smote the image in Daniel; I am the Ideal Israel in Hosea; I am the Hope of the People in Joel; I am the Heavenly Husbandman in Amos; I am the Resurrection and the Life in Jonah; I am the Restorer in Micah; I am the Publisher of Peace in Nahum; I am the Desired One of all nations in Haggai; I am the Headstone of the House of God in Zechariah; I am the Son of Righteousness with healing in his wings in Malachi." What a lesson! He talked to them about how he was revealed in the Psalms, in Proverbs, Ruth, the Song of Solomon and all the other books.

"I'm here on every page," he said, "but first I had to suffer, and then enter my glory."

The truths he shared with the disciples are very important for us, because the Suffering Servant, then, is the Son of God, and the Son of God, then, is the Messiah, and the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth. What a difference this day is making.

It is early in the evening now.

4. Early Evening (24:28-32)

And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He would go farther. And they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." And He went in to stay with them. And it came about that when He had reclined at table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"

On reaching the village, the disciples asked Jesus to stay with them. As they were eating, he broke the bread and passed it to them. Then at last their eyes were opened, but just as they realized who he was, he disappeared. They thought about their walk with him and how their hearts burned within them on their journey as he shared the Scriptures with them. For the first time, through the teaching of Jesus, they understood what

the Scriptures meant. They could not wait to share with the other disciples the good news that they had spent the whole afternoon with the resurrected Jesus Christ.

The Bible is the most published book of all time. I am sure you have a foot-high stack of Bibles in your homes. Bibles are freely available everywhere_in hotel rooms, in libraries and at bus stops. But to read the Bible is not to understand it. The Bible must be taught by the Spirit of God to hungry heart,. The Bible is not a magic book. It is the Word of God, but until we come to it in belief we will never understand it; it will be just one more history book. We need the Spirit of God to open our eyes and show us who the Christ is. Then our hearts will start to burn within us, and we will desire to learn more and more of this Lord and Savior.

Now it is evening. How the day has been moving along, and what a difference this day is making in their lives.

5. Evening (24:33-36)

And they arose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, saying, "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon." And they began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. And while they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst.

The disciples could not wait to get back and share the news with the others. This time they walked, not complaining, not wishing, not hoping, not in despair, sadness, hopelessness or aimlessness, but with their hearts burning within them. But they had to wait to share their experiences that evening, because by this time Peter was sharing what he had seen.

Finally, the two disciples said, "Can we tell you what happened to us? Well, we were going down the Emmaus road..." They started to share their story, excitedly interrupting each other and confirming the truth of their experiences. The women too, I'm sure, had a chance to speak up at last. Mary Magdalene would have said, "Yes, I touched him. I talked to him earlier this morning, but you wouldn't believe me." As their joyous talk fills the room, the resurrected Jesus stands in their midst.

What Had Begun As A Gloomy, Confusing Day Ended As The Greatest Day in Human History

What a difference that day made in the life of the disciples. Twelve hours went by before they finally came to realize that Jesus had risen. What had begun as a gloomy, confusing day ended as the greatest day in human history.

What a difference that day has made in the lives of all who have put their faith in Jesus since that first Easter. What a difference that day could make to so many of you here who think that Jesus was a prophet who was, that the Easter story is a great story which you ought to read to your children once a year. What a different life you would have if you would but go to the Lord, and, with your unbelief, tell him you do not understand but that you want your heart enlightened to see if what he says is true. Ask him to open the eyes of your heart and to burn upon your heart the truth of the Scriptures so that you too can see that he is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

What a difference that will make in your life. If you allow Jesus to be your Lord he will come into your life, he will forgive your sins, he will take care of your guilt, he will take away your shame and your fear, and he will give you his Spirit of life and power to live your life as God intended it to be lived. You will join with us in eternity when we listen to those two disciples tell us their story this time: "Yes, we were going down a road one day, and were we ever discouraged. Then Jesus appeared. . . What a difference that day made in our lives. . ."

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for the joy of Easter; thank you for those who love you and have by faith come to you as children, asking you to forgive their sins and set them free to be

your children. "For as many as believe on you, you gave the right to become the children of God." Father, if there are people here this morning who do not know you as Lord, people who think Easter is just one more story, we pray that you will move in their hearts so that they might cry out to you, "Forgive us our unbelief. Let us see what these Christians can see, and give us the new life they are talking about." We pray that you will bring them to yourself so that they might enjoy life as it was intended to be lived. We ask in our resurrected Jesus' name, Amen.

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