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Picturing Easter: The Supper at Emmaus

Caravaggio *Supper at Emmaus*[1]

Isaiah 35: 1–10 Luke 24: 13–35

Francis Watson

I

"Abide with us, for it is towards evening and the day is far spent". A chance meeting with a stranger on the road leads to an offer of overnight accommodation. An evening meal is prepared, and at the meal a moment of sudden illumination occurs. In Caravaggio's painting, dating from 1601, the scene at the supper table is lit by the light of the setting sun, which presumably comes from a small window somewhere beyond the top left corner of the painting. But the light is also the light of revelation which identifies the risen Christ, in a moment of astonished recognition. So brilliant is this light that everyday objects on the tablecloth are accompanied by patches of dark shadow. Behind the risen Christ's illuminated head, the innkeeper's shadow forms a kind of negative halo. This dramatic contrast of light and darkness is matched by the violent gestures of the figures seated to left and right. One figure lunges forward, staring intently, gripping the arms of his chair. The other throws his arms out wide, fingers splayed. The gestures are different, but they both express the same thing: absolute bewilderment in the presence of the incomprehensible and impossible.

As they recognize their table companion as the risen Christ, the two disciples pass from darkness into light. There are no shades of grey here; this is no ordinary evening light. On Easter evening the light of the setting sun becomes the light of revelation. The question is what it is that is revealed by this unexpected light, and above all *how* it is revealed. The evangelist and the artist point us towards a revelation that occurs belatedly, by way of a gesture, and in the course of a pilgrimage.

II

Caravaggio the artist and Luke the evangelist are unusual in their focus on Easter evening. The other evangelists direct attention towards Easter morning, when, very early, Jesus' tomb is found to be empty and when the first appearance of the risen Lord takes place. 'Now when Jesus had risen early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene…': so says the so-called Longer Ending of Mark, a late addition to that Gospel. In Matthew, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and another Mary as they return from the tomb to the city. In John, Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener until he addresses her by name. In each case, the women's early morning visit to the tomb involves an encounter both with angels and with the risen Lord himself. The crucial

[1] http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-the-supper-at-emmaus.

events of Easter Day all take place early: the resurrection event itself (which none of the evangelists tries to narrate), the visit to the tomb, the angelic message, and also the meeting with Jesus. Only in Luke is the risen Jesus first recognized not early but late on Easter Day, at evening when "the day is far spent". In Luke's Gospel Jesus passes through almost the whole of Easter Day unrecognized, travelling incognito. And so his disciples spend most of the day in sorrow and confusion.

Artists, poets, and musicians tend to follow Matthew, Mark, and John in identifying Easter Day with Easter morning. George Herbert's poem, *Easter*, is full of early-morning references. The first stanza begins:

> Rise, heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
> Without delays...

Stanza two:

> Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part,
> With all thy art...

The poet's heart and lute must awake and rise because 'thou wast up by break of day'. The rising of Christ precedes 'the Sun arising in the East' and ushers in an everlasting day. Easter here is Easter morning, and it evokes song. Herbert's poem calls out for the celebratory musical setting it eventually received from Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Equally focused on Easter morning is Johann Sebastian Bach's *Easter Oratorio*. Here the composer and his librettist follow the Gospel of John in its account of the events of Easter morning. The work is a kind of postscript to the great *John Passion*. Mary and her companion report that Jesus' tomb is empty and persuade Peter and John to see for themselves. In the Sinfonia that opens the work, D major trumpets announce the resurrection, but this is followed by a minor key Adagio expressing the grief of the women as they make their way to the tomb. By these purely musical means, Bach shows that their grief is already out of date. No matter how early the two Marys set out for the tomb, Jesus has already made his triumphant exit.

In contrast, Luke's Gospel switches the focus from early to late, morning to evening. Here the dawn of faith is delayed until the close of Easter Day, and this belated dawning is also the theme of Caravaggio's painting. According to both the evangelist and the artist, faith is belated because identifying the risen Lord is not straightforward – even on Easter Day. Luke's story is about non-recognition as well as recognition. The artist tries to communicate this by portraying a Jesus not directly recognizable as himself. Even in this moment of revelation the disciples look not to his face but to his gesturing hands.

III

The risen Christ looks downward with an air of serene detachment as he blesses the broken bread. Although his face is at the centre of the picture, he makes no eye-contact with us. Withdrawn into himself, he is also unaffected by his companions' reactions of astonishment. It is as if he inhabits some other reality even as he participates in our own familiar world of tables and chairs, food, drink and mealtimes. His face is rounded and smooth-skinned, almost feminine in contrast to the male figures who surround him.

If he is recognizable at all, it is not by way of his face. Nor is there any indication of the nail-marks in his hands that might have identified him.

This ambiguous and disturbing figure corresponds to the Jesus of the Gospel story who travelled incognito for most of Easter Day. Luke suggests that this incognito stems from temporarily impaired vision. On the road, the disciples' eyes 'were prevented from recognizing him'. At supper, 'their eyes were opened', and they did recognize him. But in the Longer Ending of Mark the narrator gives a new twist to the older story from Luke: after the encounter with Mary, we are told, Jesus 'appeared to two of them *in another form*, as they walked out into the country'. On that reading of Luke's story, the risen Lord appears to his followers as if in disguise. In Caravaggio's portrayal too there is hiddenness and mystery even in the moment of revelation.

How then does this figure come to be recognized at all? In Luke's account, the two disciples later recall how the risen Lord 'was made known to them in the breaking of bread'. Caravaggio takes this to refer to a recognition by gesture alone. It is in the act of blessing, breaking, and distributing the bread that one who does not look like Jesus is recognized nevertheless. This is an *indirect* recognition, and the evangelist and the artist both associate it with the Eucharist. There is broken and distributed bread on Caravaggio's table, and the innkeeper has just poured out a glass of watered-down wine. This, then, is the context in which the risen Lord may be known. Christ makes himself present in the Eucharist – a key doctrine in Caravaggio's Rome, as it is elsewhere. If the evangelist and the artist seek to communicate any one overriding point, it would be this convergence of Easter and Eucharist. The risen Lord makes himself known in the breaking of bread. To his disciples he is at last revealed as he truly is – belatedly, as Easter Day draws to a close. In contrast, the innkeeper remains outside a drama he sees but does not understand.

IV

The evangelist informs us that one of these two disciples was called Cleopas, but otherwise he tells us nothing about them, leaving the artist free to represent them as he wishes. In the painting one of them is cast as an older man, who may be Cleopas. The other is a younger man. Perhaps they are father and son. It is also unclear from the Gospel story whether Emmaus is these disciples' final destination or an overnight stop before they continue their journey. If Emmaus is their final destination, they might be offering the Stranger hospitality in their own home. If Emmaus is just a convenient place to stay the night, then the setting is probably an inn. That's the way the artist seems to take it.

This inn is actually a staging-post on a pilgrimage. We know this from the figure on the right who has a scallop-shell attached to his upper clothing, a traditional pilgrim symbol. Together with his younger companion, this pilgrim experiences a moment when all previous grief and confusion suddenly fit into a pattern and make absolute sense. The inn is just a staging-post during these pilgrims' progress, but transformative encounter with Christ can take place on the way and not just at the end.