Reading the news online this week and watching the news I read one article and saw one news item that made me want to cry … and I don’t cry very often at all. The first was an article about the loneliness of so many people in New Zealand. The Stuff article¹ stated that 29,000 people in New Zealand are completely alone with have no family or friends at all to talk to on a regular basis. Other articles talked about how many elderly people go to and spend considerable time in malls just to be around other people even if they don’t engage with them. This is indeed a crying shame in a nation that has so much. What has happened to us that social isolation has become such as big problem? In Genesis chapter 2 we find that the very first thing that God said was not good on earth was loneliness. Sadly, the 29,000 chronically lonely only scratches the surface.

The second article was one on the TV news about the calamity in Sierra Leone where hundreds of children are dying of malnutrition daily. I had to change channels it was too hard to watch. What has gone so wrong in our world that we have all the technology and capacity to bring is images like this across the world but cannot actually feed the children?

When Jesus died the disciples experienced a time of absolute shock and despair. All their hopes and dreams dashed, the One who had called them individually by name out from their normal daily lives into mission … gone. Their sense of confusion and their isolation from the world they had lived in was all but complete. They needed to start again. It’s interesting to see what people do when like takes sudden changes of direction. Sometimes it’s due to a death, the breakdown of a relationship, a change of health or financial and economic status. In the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake we have seen a whole range of responses from people from resignation, despair and suicide through everything to a dogged determination to keep on and rebuild something bold and new. When the disciples’ world was so completely shaken they saw little to be optimistic about. Jesus had died publicly and a Roman sword thrust into His chest made it absolutely sure, if it wasn’t already. Jesus’ cold, dead, body had been cut down then taken and put in the ground. The newly cut tomb was a gift from a wealth follower, Joseph of Arimathea. A number of the disciples gathered together, hiding from the Romans. Others quickly scattered back to their hometowns and previous occupations. The new-formed group around Jesus many of whom had travelled with Him over three years was rapidly disintegrating.

Then it changes. This morning we focus on the experience of two disciples who encountered the Risen Jesus unexpectedly. Who were these two disciples? Luke names the first one as Cleopas who early St Jerome, in the 4th Century observes was the brother of Joseph, Jesus’ father. This makes Cleopas Jesus’ uncle. If so the encounter is even more remarkable. Cleopas had a house in Emmaus that would later become a church and continue to exist for some 400 years. The 9th Century Benedictine monk Usuard tells us that Cleopas would later be martyred by the Jews.

¹ [http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/78333882/one-per-cent-of-kiwis-have-no-supportive-family-or-friends-research-shows]
But who was the second unnamed disciple? Traditionally, this unnamed disciple is Luke but without any evidence for the fact. A more likely and probable proposition may be that this second disciple was in fact Cleopas’ wife. John 19:25, John mentions her in his gospel narrative as having been with Mary Magdalene at the foot of the Cross. Surely, she would have left Jerusalem with her husband to return to their home in Emmaus. Also adding to this case is the propensity to name males involved in accounts but to not name female unless their naming is explicitly required. To name Cleopas but not name the highly significant Dr Luke seems highly unlikely. We might even see further evidence when, presumably Cleopas, says to the stranger they meet, that “some of the women told stories that amazed us”. Interestingly, Jesus’ first appearances were to women and not to the eleven male disciples. We might read all sorts of things into that. One could easily imagine the problem the men had with that too. Was the intensity of the conversation between the disciples on the Emmaus Road, before Jesus turned up, in part because they were discussing, or debating, how reliable a woman’s testimony in such things was? Was Cleopas keen to return home, back to normal life, to get on with things but his wife keen to stay and see what transpired – was she encouraged by the women but Cleopas was unconvinced? I love Luke’s they “conversed and reasoned” – were they in fact arguing over what had really happened? They were clearly unhappy.

Regardless, the disciples are met on the road by a stranger to whom they recount the events of the Passover week in Jerusalem. This account always seems to me like a Superman comic because we read it with so much future knowledge. Every time Clark Kent walks around we see Superman so easily and wonder why everyone around him is so stupid. Here, Jesus is the stranger, yet they are “kept from recognising him” the Scriptures tell us. Cleopas talks of Jesus in the past tense so he is not as yet convinced of Jesus’ resurrection, although he is confused by the women’s stories. The “stranger”

Then proceeds to unpack the prophecies and Scriptures of the Old Testament pointing to Jesus. Yet still, while their hearts are excited within as they slowly comprehend God’s plan they still do not recognise Jesus until He stays, at their insistence, and breaks bread with them. Fellowship over food continues to have massive significance. Then suddenly, miraculously, Jesus is gone but they know who they have been with and that knowledge will change their lives.
The disciples’ response is interesting of itself. Obviously having stopped for the night in the safety of a wayside house, off the highway and secure from brigands and gangs of thugs, they now abandon all thought of personal safety to make the rushed journey back to Jerusalem some 12 kilometres away. All concern for personal safety is overcome in their haste to share what they have learnt. No longer is Jesus in the past, He is very much in the present and the news has to be shared. When it is known absolutely that Jesus is alive arguments cease, life and its direction change.

How do we bring this together this morning? It is all too easy for us to become stuck in a rut, particularly when life doesn’t go the way we want or expect. Doing the same things, thinking the same things, becoming complacent about life and our situation is the easy way out. Doing so becomes increasingly self-centred and selfish. When things don’t go our way the natural thing to do is to pull back, to retrench, to build walls to make ourselves feel safe. We want to put our head in the sand and make life go away.

We can see this in Cleopas’ response to Jesus’ death. When hope seems dashed Cleopas doesn’t want to listen to anyone, he simply wants to return home and get on with things – to get back to so-called “normal” life and forget what had excited and motivated him previously. If things get too much, too difficult, if the life of faith doesn’t go the way I want, then forget it and get back to what I can do and achieve. His wife though is not of this mind. She trusts and believes her friends who have experienced something different and she knows there is more to come. But obedient and faithful she stays with her husband even if he is being a stubborn mule. What can change this situation?

God has a habit of breaking into our lives in ways we don’t always expect. God does not want us to become complacent and He does want us to know what He wants us to do. God brings people into our lives to speak His truth to us. Some people, the Scriptures tell us, have, in their hospitality, even entertained angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2). God brings people into our lives to speak truth to us if we will listen. Like Cleopas we can be stubborn, and let’s face it, we often are with the people closest to us, or we can be open to change. The voices we listen to in our lives are critical. Who are you listening to? Who is it that influences your direction? Who do you, physically or metaphorically, invite in to share bread with and what do these people open your eyes to? You see it can be either good or bad. Our companions on the road do influence us. Who walks with you? Who do you walk with?

We should also note here the importance of the Scriptures. What did Jesus want the two Emmaus disciples to know? That, absolutely, God’s pre-ordained plans were being carried out. Plans written and recorded hundreds of years earlier were being fulfilled exactly, to the day, to the moment, as they had to be. If we know the Scriptures we know the power of God revealed. We have confidence in the Almighty power and plan of God.

But the story doesn’t stop here. The gospel writers continue to show how the resurrected Jesus went on to meet with them and other disciples on a regular basis for a number of weeks. These encounters change the lives and direction of the disciples forever. Knowing the resurrected Jesus they could not go back to what they were. They were changed for ever. Like our two disciples their eyes were opened and once they were, Jesus had work for them to do.

It is the same for us today. The Great Commission of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and bringing all people into discipleship and fellowship is one given to all of us who believe. We will either walk this journey with each other and do as God wants or we will choose selfishly. God calls us into greater and greater engagement with each other. We have to embrace these
opportunities. God places companions alongside us to speak into our lives, sometimes He will do it directly Himself. The question is – are we listening? Are our eyes being opened to what God is doing? Are we moving forward, even excitedly rushing out to tell others?

A final thought for today. As God speaks to us and uses others to speak to us so He also uses us to speak to others. We speak the truth in love to others as we spend time with them, work together with them, fellowship and break bread with them. If we don’t walk and work together we are refusing what God asks of us. We are God’s gift to each other through Jesus. As we have the privilege of speaking God’s life to others, we become a means of grace whereby the loneliness of the world, the lack of compassion and care, are overcome by a new breaking of bread, a new enthusiasm and a new and increasing outpouring of love. The answer to the world’s problems are answered one by one, life by life as we take up the Commission Jesus has entrusted to us.

Amen.