



EMILE CAILLIET



EDNA HATFIELD

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# THE GREAT DOER OF THE UNEXPECTED

Sermon at Baccalaureate Service, June 7, 1959

EMILE CAILLIET

Luke 24:17: *And he said to them, "What is this conversation you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.*

THE Emmaus disciples were dejected. What had happened in recent days did not make sense to them. The fact remains that they were disciples. They had lived with Jesus during his earthly ministry. They had witnessed the events of which he had been the center. They had listened to his teaching, pondered over his answers to their many inquiries. And yet they had hardly begun to understand what had taken place.

Do not rely on the "Messianic secret" to account for this, telling me that he who had been condemned as Messiah had never appeared in that role. This is too easy, too simple a solution. I for one am far from disposed to see the Christ and the historical Jesus put asunder in the summary ways current in our day. Surely the disciples had increasingly become aware of a profound difference between them and the Master. He had never asked their advice, never argued with them, never prayed with them. A sudden disclosure of his Messiahship would have overwhelmed them and confused them, if we are to judge from the extent to which they misunderstood the little they knew. Enough to say that they had been allowed to grow into an awareness of his significance that should have proved sufficient for them, even at the hour of

trial and testing. Yet it had not been so. They had deserted him and fled. And so it was that they now were defeated men bereft of understanding.

What happened to these first disciples might well happen to us also. It is a fact of common experience that the failure of the Emmaus disciples continues to be our peril. We too have been disheartened by glaring discrepancies between what we were sure to be the will of God for us, and actual happenings which contradicted our well-grounded assurances. We have entered into the closet, shut the door, and prayed to the Father who is in secret; and our Father which sees in secret has rewarded us openly with a clear word of guidance. At such hallowed moments we have acquiesced with joy and simplicity of heart. We have thereupon proceeded with specific and sometimes detailed arrangements. The blueprint we had good reason to believe to have been God-given allowed us to see the way ahead, sometimes at long range, and with amazing precision. But then, a few weeks or even days later, there intervened out of a clear sky an event, or series of events, which utterly shattered the pattern which had originated in the prayer closet. Like the Emmaus disciples we were disheartened. What had taken place did not make any more sense to us than it had to them.

This perennial situation is admittedly a complex one. Yet even such a mystery never amounts to utter dark-

ness. It points to a kind of light which increases in intensity as we dwell on it with ardor and fervor—two words incidentally, which suggest burning and heat. Bunyan's Interpreter might accordingly tell us that the work of Grace is involved at this point.

### I

We are indeed not left in utter darkness.

This much we already know: God has a plan for our life. And further: God knows that we need to know something of this plan, were it only because his call may imply even a minimum of preparation on our part. Thus the reason you have spent three years in this seminary is that the call to the ministry or to Christian education had come to you in the fullness of time.

Even so, we may be startled at realizing that the New Testament has next to nothing to say about the ways of ascertaining God's will for one's life—a major concern for us, yet one seemingly unknown to the early Christians. In the Gospel according to Mark, we read that Jesus passing along the Sea of Galilee saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net. So he said to them simply, "Follow me and I will make you fish for men." At once, we are told, they dropped their net and went after him. You and I would have immediately inquired as to the where and how of the call. They did not. Neither did Jesus elaborate on the subject. It was only in the long run, as necessity or even emergency arose, that he told them what to do. The enigmatic passage of John 21:18 may suggest that Jesus gave Peter a hint as to how he would die; yet there is nowhere a similar indication of how he would live. None of us, I am sure, would construe

as such the answer of Jesus to him at Caesarea Philippi, "upon this rock I will build my church." Neither should we take argument from the assertion that preaching in those days was a much simpler affair than it is today. In God's design, mind you, Peter was to proclaim the Christ in and around Jerusalem. Now turn to the Book of the Acts, and see for yourself what it meant to deal with those well-trained Jewish officials! Yet even with such a task ahead of him, Peter was not given any blueprint.

The disciples may indeed have learned from the Master, not to make inquiries about the future. By this I mean such inquiries as those currently foremost in our minds today. Texts abound to that effect. If it be said that the Sermon on the Mount constitutes the systematic arrangement of the teaching of Jesus, it becomes evident that utter trust in the Father's care was the only needed cure for anxiety, "Take no thought for your life. . . . Your heavenly father knoweth. . . . Take no thought for the morrow. . . ." All we have to ask for is summed up in the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us to-day our bread for the morrow." This Moffatt translation places the emphasis where it belongs. Tomorrow constitutes our horizon. And there is far more at stake in this emphasis than a suggestion of "interim ethic," as we begin to realize. The right attitude to which Jesus is constantly pointing, is that of the centurion who knows that a man under authority merely does what he is told to do on the spur of the moment. The Master singles him out for praise: "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." A faith, that is, that does not ask long-range questions. And when on rare oc-



casions such questions were put to Jesus, the questioner was rebuked. This was the case when Peter asked the risen Lord what would happen to John, only to be told: "What is that to you?"—which freely translated in contemporary American reads: "That is none of your business!"

My excuse for indulging in such a free translation from this pulpit is that we all need to be aroused into a consciousness of our true condition as disciples. Our activity and our ways of thinking are to a high degree determined by our own presuppositions, by those we owe to our traditional views, and also by the collective notions we share with our contemporaries. We know all this but only with what John Baillie would call, "the top of our mind." It is well nigh impossible for us to see it the way it really is. Thus when George Muller formulated his rules on how to ascertain the will of God, he gave priority to the need for seeking "to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter." I doubt that contemporary psychoanalysts would pronounce this first article possible of achievement. Even so, what is of special interest to us is that the experienced man of prayer George Muller so evidently was, insisted that *nine-tenths* of the trouble with most of us is just here.

And so it was with the first disciples. Thus Mark shows the sons of Zebedee advancing their claim to the seats they meant to occupy in the Lord's glory. They could not help but be obsessed by preconceptions born of the later Jewish view of the advent of the kingdom of God. No wonder the arrest of Jesus and his ghastly crucifixion struck them with panic and despair. Hence the loss of nerve of the Emmaus disciples. They

had trusted that he would be the redeemer of Israel according to the currently held view of the event. Actually the high priests and the rulers had delivered him to be sentenced to death and had him crucified. He had been dead for three days. Heed now the radical change of outlook forced upon the downcast disciples.

Upon hearing them bewail the collapse of their dreams, Jesus called them fools. Then he interpreted to them the passages referring to himself throughout the scriptures. The Germans have a word to characterize the thing the Emmaus pilgrims were now asked to do. That word is, *umlernen*—to learn the other way around. The reason they had erred was that their expectations had ultimately been their own, while the God of Jesus Christ is shown throughout the Bible to be the Great Doer of the unexpected.

## II

This truly bewildering characteristic comes to an early expression in the "scandal of particularity" which stares us in the face from the very core of Scripture. It actually constitutes the significance of the Bible, namely that God's revelation has been conveyed through historical events concerning a chosen people. This is all the more unexpected as we consider on the one hand the holy, all wise, all powerful nature of God, and on the other, the stubborn, crafty, and even treacherous character of Israel, together with its social and political insignificance. And yet the choice, however incredible, comes to pass with the call of Abraham.

The dimension of the unexpected overlays even this scandal of particularity. The very ways of God disclose it at every turn of events. Consider for

example the very Act through which a mass of depressed serfs are delivered out of their Egyptian servitude in the midst of truly epic events. Again, think of the unexpected appearance of the sea-roving Philistines threatening the confederation of the clans of Israel, or of the sordid spectacle of the foolish, and even criminal Israelites under Jeroboam II. Or pause to understand why God should have troubled to send Amos to those adulterous deniers of all justice, in the midst of fraud and perjury? To turn to yet another aspect of the unexpected, why should such a man as Hosea have had to cope with an unfaithful wife, or a John the Baptist have fallen victim to the sadism of Herod? If God is the Almighty, how may we account for the fact that Jeremiah's exultant joy at Josiah's reform should so soon have turned to gloom, as the shrines and idols of yesterday seemed to have only been removed to make room for Temple worship and the trappings of its ritual? Why should *Cyrus* have been the instrument of the exiles' mighty deliverance from Babylon? And subsequently, how may one explain the utter lack of compassion shown by Israel in the face of pagan darkness, as exemplified in the Book of Jonah?

And yet, withal, the Great Doer of the unexpected stands also revealed as showing forth an infinite steadiness of purpose, doing for man what man could never do for himself. What actually hides such steadiness is the fact of an infinite variety of response on the part of God. This further aspect also should have been evident to the Emmaus disciples. The point I am anxious to make, however, is that to us the New Testament bears the same witness as does the Old to the ways of the living God

who stands at the roaring loom of history.

What should particularly draw our attention as Christians is the unexpected nature of the manner in which He wrought out his purpose in the ministry of our Lord. People came to Jesus to see a wonder worker. They were actually confronted by God's will for them. The ecclesiastics of the time should have been expected to do their utmost to help Jesus. Yet the most violent opposition he encountered came from them, so that they were singled out by him for utter condemnation. And so it had been with the "unexpected" as a dimension of the disciples' experience. Their anticipation of the glory at hand had come to naught on Calvary. They were left in utter despondency as we have insistently pointed out. And yet, in the power of God, their fellowship with the Lord would be restored to them a hundred-fold in the glow of Easter morn. Ever afterwards disciples would be in closer fellowship with the living and ever present Christ than the first disciples had been in the days of his flesh. Another extraordinary turn of history would transform Saul, the ruthless prosecutor of the Gentiles into Paul, the greatest missionary the Christian cause has ever hailed. In vain had the high priest and Pilate his accomplice tried to annihilate the small sect. Henceforth the Gospel would spread over the Western world like a prairie fire. The Palestinian confinement had burst wide open, so that the formerly Jewish context of New Testament Christianity had become an imperial context. How different from the expectation of the Emmaus disciples the fulfillment turned out to be! And so,

we feel prompted to exclaim with the Psalmist:

Thou art the god that does wonders . . .

The Christ was no longer limited as he had been in the days of his flesh. So also the overseas Jews were free from the narrow exclusiveness of their Jerusalem brethren. As for the Gentiles, they knew of no such restrictive influences. The Gospel message itself had been released from binding Hebrew connotations. It is as if God's imperatives, or at least his earnest entreaties had become transfigured into supremely responsive ways of persuasion. Only a reverent survey of the development of hymnology and devotional classics, better still, of the biographies of saintly, committed lives throughout the Christian era, could begin to do justice to the fullness of divine response.

Truly the ways of God are mediated to us throughout the ages as those of the Great Doer of the unexpected.

### III

Let me ask you, my friends, in conclusion: Should any of us keep on contending with these ways in the face of the steadiness of a purpose disclosed over thousands of years? Or is it not simply that the very infinity of divine response exposes our human infirmity? What actually causes our consternation is that we never can secure from God, even through prayer and entreaty, the long-range assignment we so direly crave. What we actually want is a blueprint for our lives, one that we could slip into our pocket and walk away with, on our own.

Should this ever be the case, should this baleful privilege be granted to us, then the whole record of God's dealings with his people throughout the ages would indeed be given the lie. For if there is even one single truth this record conveys, this truth is to the effect that God never gives a blueprint to anyone.

The reason for this should by now have become clear to the unprejudiced reader of the Bible: the heavenly Father acts as if he did not want his own to part ways with him, to become engrossed in the glory of their self-sufficiency until they finally end in the dejection of the far country. Quite otherwise. He wants them to grow into a loving dependence upon him, to foster in their whole being an utter trust in his infinite Providence.

Members of the Graduating Class, may this truth break upon you as it did of old upon the Emmaus disciples, when Jesus finally sat at meat with them. Looking at the Communion Table, I see a further analogy yet between their condition and yours. Let me then conclude as the record of their immediate experience concludes in the Gospel according to Luke:

"And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him. . ."

*And they knew him.* Did you say you were looking for the way you must go? He is the way. But you must always depend on him for the next step, and be prepared for the unexpected.