**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS (#1)**

***Cleopas & Friend (Luke 24)***

Do you believe in UFO’s (i.e. **U**nidentified **F**lying **O**bjects)? There is a small segment of our population that spend their entire lives obsessed with searching for and finding UFO’s. They believe in space aliens that are “out there.” Some unexplainable phenomenon is suddenly seen as an intelligent being from outer space making contact with humans on earth.

In 1977 the famous director Steven Spielberg realized a lifelong dream of making a film he called *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. It was a low-budget film that cost only $19 million but grossed over $300 million. It became an iconic movie that has found itself in the Sci-Fi genre hall of fame. For years I had no idea what the title even meant because I never ventured into the science fiction world, and especially into the crazy UFO world. I doubt many of you have either. So, let me explain. In the UFO dictionary there are five encounters with UFO’s:
1) When a person simply sees a UFO within 150 meters.
2) When a person spots evidence of a UFO by scorch marks or indentions on the ground.
3) When a person has actual visual sightings with a being inside a UFO.
4) When a person is actually taken inside the spacecraft and experimented on by aliens.
5) When there is actual communication between humans and aliens.

Weird. Really weird. The very idea that people have claimed to have any encounters with real space aliens is strange, but to push it to the third, fourth or fifth levels is over the top. Someone needs to call for the men in the white coats with straitjackets.

I realize there are millions of secular humanists who feel the same way about me and all other Christians who believe that earth was once visited by spirit beings (i.e. angels) and even by God incarnate (Jesus Christ). As Paul would put it from the secularist’s viewpoint, *“we are of all men the most pitiable*” (I Cor. 15:19). The world thinks us “*strange*” (I Pet. 4:4) for believing in not only a close encounter of the third kind (over 500 eye-witnesses signed off on having actual visual sightings of the resurrected Lord), but a close encounter of the fifth kind (actual communication between humans and deity – I Cor. 15:1-8).

This week I would like to do something that supports our faith that God once visited earth and that He still communicates with all “earthlings” to express His love and support for each of us. We are not to be “*pitied*” and we are not “*strange*” to believe that Immanuel (“*God with us*” – Matt. 1:23) walked this earth and left “marks and indentions” on our hearts. Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

The first “close encounter” I wish to explore is in Luke 24 with the famous seven-mile walk of Cleopas and his friend with Jesus.

Nine days before this close encounter we read of the famous “Triumphal Entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem to the roar of the crowd (read Luke 19). “*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of he Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest*” the massive multitude shouts, waving palm branches as they worship Him.

But what a difference a week makes. The very next Friday is the infamous “Humiliating Exit” in which many from this same crowd roar again, but this time saying “*Let Him be crucified! Let Him be crucified*!” (Luke 23). Pilate washed his hands and passed sentence that Jesus was to be scourged and hung on a rugged cross.

He was buried in a borrowed grave on Friday and remained there for part of three days (Friday night, all day Saturday, a short time Sunday). Suddenly, “Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o’er His foes, He arose a victor from the dark domain, and He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah Christ arose!”

But then wild reports started circulating that caused the terrified and cowering apostles and other disciples to wonder what was going on. First, some women show up proclaiming the risen Lord (Lk. 24:9-11). Then Peter and John rush to the tomb and come away wondering what had happened (Lk. 24:12). Next came this close encounter of the fifth kind (Lk. 24:13-30).

As Cleopas and his friend walk the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus they are suddenly joined by a stranger who they do not recognize. They are amazed he (“He”) doesn’t know what has happened that day. They tell him (“Him”) of the rumors spreading like wildfire of the possible resurrection of Christ. This “stranger” proceeds to give an Old Testament discourse on the Messianic prophecies that foretold this event. As they walk they get heartburn (“did not our hearts burn within us?”).

I have a question about this story. Why were the eyes of these men “*restrained so that they did not know Him*?” My guess is that they will represent all of us until the Lord returns. We, like them, must come to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). We have to accept the eyewitness testimony of the four apostles (Matthew, John, Peter, Paul) and four prophets (Mark, Luke, James, Jude) who wrote the New Testament. Seven of those eight men were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord, with Luke being the lone exception (Lk. 1:1-4 – and he interviewed many of the apostles and eyewitnesses in order to write the gospel of Luke and book of Acts). It was John that spoke for the other eyewitnesses when he said they had “*heard… seen… touched*” the resurrected Christ. By accepting their testimony we can experience “*that your joy may be full*” (I Jn. 1:1-4).

Later that night, after Cleopas and friend had rushed back to report to the apostles their first-hand experience, Jesus suddenly appears to give them all a close encounter of the fifth kind! A week later the lone holdout, “doubting” Thomas, is permitted his wish that “*unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe*” (Jn. 20:25). The result of his close encounter? “*My Lord and my God*!”

No, I do not believe in UFO’s or other paranormal science fiction rumors. There is no empirical evidence to support such fantasies. But that’s not true regarding Christ’s resurrection. Not only is there proof-positive evidence, it is overwhelming and irrefutable! Our faith in the unseen (no living person has seen Jesus) is not a blind leap in the dark (like Spielberg’s movie), but a documented open-and-shut case that would stand up in any court of law!

And all of God’s people said… “*Lord, I believe*!”

I love you. - Rick