

ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING?

The Third Sunday of Easter

April 30, 2016

This famous passage from Luke about two glum disciples meeting up with Jesus on the road to Emmaus may be the richest story in the New Testament. It vividly and poignantly explores how the mind and heart, the body and the soul, find their way to God in Christ. It explores how it happened to them, and it opens to us how it has been or can be with us. This is a story that teaches and inspires and mystifies.

So much about post-Resurrection stories is about presence and absence. He was with us, the disciples say, and now he is gone. So say we, day after day, in the ordinary rhythms of our lives. God is with me—thanks be to God.

Then the next day, when some darkness descends: *where is God?*

So we ask: how do we know? How are we guided? Where do we find the risen Christ? Today we join the disciples, lost in their grief and uncertainty about what has happened, walking to Emmaus for reasons we don't know; they may not know themselves. Maybe they just need someplace to go, someplace to walk to as they talk. On the same day that Peter looked into the empty tomb, they're "talking with each other about all the things that had happened." For them this is a day like 9/11 was for us—a time when the world changes and we're filled with all kinds of thoughts and feelings that we can barely manage to take in.

Then Jesus appears. “But,” Luke says mysteriously, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” The wording implies that there was some active force keeping them from knowing him on sight, and it pushes us to ask, *what* kept them from it?

The easy answer is that God did it. But why? For me, saying that it was God is just a shorthand way to point to their unreadiness to see him. They’re stunned, and in the jargon of therapy, they still have a lot to process. What exactly has happened, and what does it mean? He’s missing from the tomb? Has he risen from the dead? Really?

So Jesus comes near to them, and begins asking them questions. The questions he asks I can only describe as messing with them. On the very morning of the resurrection, he comes up to them and asks, “Hey, guys, what’re you talking about?” That stops them dead. Their answer is an attempt to say politely, “What do you think we’re talking about?” and they cite “the things that have taken place...in these days.” Jesus, still playing with them, asks, “What things?”

Then they tell him, in a torrent of words, all that has happened. In another example of the author of Luke’s being the most gifted writer of the New Testament, the outpouring of the facts tumbling forth asks for the talents of a character actor to read. Except, of course, the waterfall of words is spoken by “they,” so if it were to be performed, the two disciples should take turns

blurting out their story. They tell it by rushing along with “and” after “and” and “Yes, and besides all this,” and long, rushing sentences.

Then it’s Jesus’ turn to reproach and to teach once again, as he had been doing during all his days with his original disciples, “Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart...” *Slow of heart*. That phrase stops me every time I read it. For me it describes a human way of walking around in the world, and even more, a contemporary way of living, with our heads much more than our hearts. And I do mean *much* more. We try to think our way, and *only* think our way, into the good things of life, and we try even harder to think, or scheme our way away from and out of the bad things of life—and all the while our emotions, or our hearts, are languishing or sabotaging our efforts by their absence without our knowing it.

As Jesus was about to go on his way, it is the disciples’ hearts that bid them to invite him to stay with them—their instinct for hospitality and generosity. And it would be pretty, and plausible, to think that Jesus’ interpreting “to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” helped jumpstart their slow hearts from the torpor all that the fearsome events of the past three days had caused.

And it is that invitation that leads to Jesus breaking bread and sharing it with them—and it is this act of giving, sharing, and community that opens their eyes finally to recognize him. Over the centuries, the message for the church

has become clear: it is by gathering in community, in love and sharing, that we are able to see the face of Christ.

The story of the Cleopas and his unnamed friend is our story: it is about hearing the scriptures interpreted—or interpreting them ourselves—in the light of the presence of Christ in our lives. It’s about hospitality turned into communion, into Eucharist, which means thanksgiving, about taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, which is the act of sharing, and then giving it in the name of Jesus. So we must not be slow of heart, as the crowd was in Jerusalem when Peter spoke to them on Pentecost in our first reading today, telling them that the man they had crucified was Lord and Messiah: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to heart...” They ask what they should do, and Peter’s answer creates three thousand converts who, Acts tells us, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Another lesson from the experience of the two disciples is that we should look for the face of Christ in every face that we meet on our own streets and roads. For most of us, this gift comes in moments. But it’s a gift to aspire to, to work towards—it can be developed, like the wind to run or the strength to climb—it is, simply, the gift to love.

When we do this our own witness becomes part of the history of the church. How we minister to strangers is at the heart of our call, because we

know from this story if don't already know it from our lives, that a stranger can be the resurrected Jesus. The vanished Christ—the *temporarily* vanished Christ, lives in the faces we encounter in a broken world.

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