

Easter 3A, Luke 24.13-35

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One Easter Sunday evening almost 40 years ago, I stood up to read something in a worship service, which was being held in our college cafeteria. Bob, the campus chaplain, had asked me to do so. It was a sermon about those two travelers to Emmaus we just heard about. And a few paragraphs in, I read this:

Emmaus can be a trip to the movies just for the sake of seeing a movie or to a cocktail party just for the sake of the cocktails. Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life. (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p.85)

I'd heard plenty of sermons in my life up till then, but I'd never heard one that sounded anything like that. Even though what I was reading had been written by Frederick Buechner more than twenty years earlier. And I'm reading those lines to you now, not because the point of this sermon is about Emmaus as that place where we go to forget, but because I felt my heart burning within me right then. It was like I'd been reading the Bible all my life in black and white, like the first half of *The Wizard of Oz*, and suddenly the technicolor kicked in.

Do you know that feeling? You do, don't you? When a world you thought you knew came suddenly alive like it never quite had before? Has your heart ever burned within you like that? Did you listen to it when it did? Were you changed?

There's something curious to me about these post resurrection appearances in Luke. I always took note of the way Jesus is said to have explained the mysteries of the Bible to the people who were present. Suddenly everything made sense to them, it seemed. In today's gospel, we heard, "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." In the story right after this one in Luke, Jesus eats a piece of fish to prove he's not a ghost and Luke says, "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..." Wouldn't you love that? Don't you have a question or two about how in the world we're to make sense of the Bible, that wild jumble of history and myth and poetry and song and prophecy and apocalyptic visions? Wouldn't you like Jesus to show you exactly how it all fits together and how he fits into the middle of it all?

But here's the thing. If the explanation was most important, why don't the stories give us the explanation? Why don't they tell us what Jesus said? Because they don't. What they do give us is the burning hearts of the people who were listening to him on the road, the slack-jawed wonder of the ones who watched this apparition eat a piece of broiled fish.

Marshal McLuhan famously said that the medium is the message. And the medium for the gospel truth of the resurrection in the immediate wake of the resurrection is not an explanation of what it means. It's not even an explanation of how the resurrection fits into the story of Jesus's people, the Jews. That's not what we're given. We're given the encounters themselves. We're given ordinary people being drawn toward the risen Christ, who happened to be talking about the Bible when their hearts began to burn.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a sucker for a good explanation. Are you? I have so many questions about the way things are. Back in college when I read that sermon I wanted C. S. Lewis to tell me why Christianity made sense. I wanted him to prove to me, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the resurrection was a rational thing for an individual to believe. I don't actually think that's all bad. Your curiosity about the world is a holy thing. In fact, I'd even say it's made of the same stuff that drew those first witnesses of the resurrection toward the risen Christ.

But what if the desire to know and to understand is just what sets us off down the road toward Emmaus? Jesus is the one who meets us along the way, unexpectedly and mysteriously, and then, more often than not, disappears just as quickly. Maybe because he doesn't want any of us to think we've got a lead pipe cinch on what it all means.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "If you meet the Buddha on the side of the road, kill him." For all their serenity and expansiveness, Buddhists can be really blunt. But the idea is similar to the Meister Eckhardt when he said, "Whatever thou sayest of God is untrue." Anytime we think we've arrived at an adequate understanding of God, it can't be the true God that we've come to understand. God will never be reduced to our explanations. You don't have to be a great mystic to believe this. If you think you've come to understand the person sitting next to you in any definitive way, hang around a little longer. If they have a pulse, they'll confound you soon enough. At least they will if you're paying any honest attention to them at all. Even the simplest among us human beings is a creature of infinite complexity, worthy of wonder.

There was also an elusiveness in the way Jesus taught, wasn't there? In several places he seemed to say that he told parables, not to clarify things, but so people would not understand him. As if any frame of mind that is perfectly confident in its knowledge is not what he was after in us. Why would this be so?

I admit it's ironic at best and hypocritical at worst to be offering you an explanation for why Jesus might have refused to explain things. But at least I'm coming clean about it, ok?

Looking in on the gospel through my own worst tendencies, it occurs to me that one thing I like about a clear explanation is that I can possess it all by myself. Even if I got it from you, now that it's in my brain, it's mine. Maybe this is why the notion that possessing an accurate understanding of the resurrection is what God cares most about seems so counter to scripture. Isn't this a form of the mindset Jesus kept calling out? How many times and in how many ways did he tell us that if our religious ideas and practices settle into us as prized possessions, and begin setting us apart from other people, especially if they are setting us above people we think have wrong ideas and wrong practices, well then our religion is what's keeping us from God. Not what's connecting us to God.

So, I wonder if this might be why, in these post resurrection stories, we don't get the specifics of what Jesus said about scripture. We get the burning, curious, open hearts of the people who were listening to him. Don't you think that's what God still wants in us? For these

stunning old stories to draw us toward Jesus and toward one another as we let our precious certainties let go of the wheel take their proper place in the back seat of our mind?

Because how much smaller and sadder a gospel it would be to think God loves us because we're right, rather than because God's very nature is love. How much paltrier would the good news be if it were that some of us are forgiven because we are right, rather than because it is God's nature to forgive us all?

Friends, I think this Easter season what I need most is to be dropped into the gospel again in all its technicolor glory. Because if my encounter with the risen Christ, whether I'm singing about him in this church service, or receiving his body and blood at this table, or looking into his eyes when I welcome a stranger, feed someone who is hungry, visit someone who's been imprisoned ... if my encounter with the risen Christ causes my heart to burn within me with only more love for only more of God's beloved ones, then Jesus really is the one I've encountered along the road to my Emmaus. Not as a puzzle to be solved. But as a person and the presence of God all at once.

Friends, is this not the beginning and the end of the Christian way? Not Jesus as tidy explanation of the way I probably already think things are. Jesus as my guiding, bottomless obsession. The one I long to know and the one whose life and whose way I want to be the light by which I see absolutely everything else. Because ... well ... I don't know what else to tell you except remember how our hearts burned within us when we met him in Luke's gospel on the road to Emmaus that day?