

Easter Day: Luke 24.1-12

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Claude Levi-Strauss — no relation to the blue jeans guy — was a famous French anthropologist. There's no shame in never having heard of him. Being famous among French anthropologists is like being famous among collectors of bone buttons or a famous expert in small engine repair. Anyway, Claude Levi-Strauss studied primitive cultures. He was curious about what passes for kinship in a group and what myths it uses to make sense of the world. He was also French, so of course he was curious about the cultural uses of food as well. One of his most interesting insights was that food is not only good to eat, food is good to think with.

You may have been accused, as I have many times, of thinking with your stomach. That's not exactly what Levi-Strauss meant. What he meant was that when humans learned to share parts of a cooked antelope they began to think they could share parts of a heated house. And abstractions like the phrase "she's a warm person" or even a professional wrestler's decision to call himself "Stone Cold Steve Austin" come way on down the cultural line. Embodied experience of heat and cold in the physical world comes first. We can forget that we humans do some of our most important thinking, not with our heads, but with our bodies and even with objects out in the physical world.

For centuries in this culture, we've privileged the kind of thinking that happens in the brain over the kind of thinking that happens in the body. And let's face it. Men have mostly led the effort. It's mostly men who still are. Look around the room in the upper echelons of artificial intelligence. It's mostly men, many of whom are actually dreaming of uploading their consciousness to the cloud one day and who think that doing so would be a form of eternal life. I'm not kidding or exaggerating. The richest man in the world believes a version of what's called "transhumanism." All the while, there are very real concerns right here in Memphis about the impact the largest generator of intelligence that at least ostensibly admits to being *artificial* could have on our very real air and our very real water.

There are different ways of knowing, different ways to knowledge, aren't there? And there are ancient ways, physical ways, embodied ways, feminine ways, many have suggested, that we're foolish to ignore or diminish. It may be past time to relearn them.

It may not be just one more neutral detail in the story that women were the first ones at the empty tomb. They weren't there first because they'd figured out what Jesus was up to. They had no theological systems or schemes, no political goals or theories that sent them out that morning. They were there because he was dead. And they had work to do. Women's work in their day.

It was work they probably learned from their mothers and from their mothers' mothers. Whether or not they knew *why*, they knew *how* to take a dead body in their hands and anoint it with oils and spices as if it were not just some empty shell but a precious and holy thing. Something still worthy of love and care and touch and honor. Mary Magdalene and Joanna and the other women were at the tomb because they had work to do.

The men were not at the tomb, presumably because they had work to do too. Manly work. They were... well... apparently they were in a meeting. They were probably putting their hands to work too, wringing them, raising them in the air or banging them on the table to make some insightful point about the events of Good Friday and what a sensible response to it all might be.

Maybe they even clapped their hands at the braver points made in that locked and secret room. The men were not at the tomb that Sunday morning, because they had work to do.

So in a way, we're presented with two ways of understanding, two ways of knowing in this story, aren't we? There is the way of deliberation, sifting through the information and turning over the facts. Wondering why things are and whether they could be different. And there is the way of loving action, of reaching out and taking hold of the world as it is. It is the way of physical encounter. Some things just cannot be known any other way. Knowing about the world and knowing the world are not the same thing.

We're told that after the men in the shining clothes ask the women why they are looking for the living among the dead, the women remember what Jesus had said. This seems like a small detail. Maybe an obvious one. Of course they remembered, right? But, no. Nobody did. For so many of Jesus's followers, a whole bunch of expectations and assumptions in their minds had to be let go of before they could even begin to take in the strange new reality that was standing right in front of them. But something in the way these women approached the tomb helped keep their minds a little more nimble and open. They were the first to sense some powerful continuity between the Jesus they saw die two days prior, and the one who they've just heard is living. The one they've just heard is no longer among the dead.

Sometimes we want to believe that we can know what we need to know from a safe distance. We'd like to believe that we can know things in the abstract, dispassionately. And you can. You can know your telephone number and the capitol of Swaziland and the average velocity of an unladen swallow as bare facts you've stored in your brain. But to know, say, that a friend would lay down his life for you, that's knowledge of a different order, isn't it? Some things, the things that matter most to us, we say can only be known in the heart, in the gut. The metaphors follow from a very real flutter in your chest or the feeling of something like fire in your belly.

I don't want more information about the resurrection. I don't want anyone to tell me what a rational modern person might respectably believe. I also don't want it nailed down, like a living body to a cross again, in some theory of atonement. What I want you and me to experience today is love coming after us, not in the abstract. But in the flesh.

Here. Let yet another Mary, Marie Howe, try and pull you out of your head and into the story in a poem she titled "Easter."

Two of the fingers on his right hand
had been broken

so when he poured back into that hand it surprised
him — it hurt him at first.

And the whole body was too small. Imagine
the sky trying to fit into a tunnel carved into a hill.

He came into it two ways:
from the outside, as we step into a pair of pants.

And from the center — suddenly all at once.
Then he felt himself awake in the dark alone.

This Easter morning, my friends, I want you to experience the love of God coming for you like that. I want you to experience the love that made us and the love that still moves us coming for you, not as a redemption theory, but as someone with two broken fingers and a body who would lay down his life for you. Can you believe in your body, in your bones, that a love like

that exists? A love that wants you and me to let go of our obsessions with ideas we hold in our heads that seem to keep driving us apart, and get on with the work of loving the world like God loves the world. From right up close, in the flesh.

I know. Nobody knows what actually happened in that tomb in the night. Marie Howe doesn't know. Billy Graham didn't know. If I may risk heresy at Calvary Church, Marcus Borg didn't know either. The women themselves, in Luke's account, don't mistake their risen friend for a gardener. In Luke, there's only the rolled back stone, the pile of empty graveclothes, a couple of men in dazzling white to state the obvious: "He is not here."

But on this Easter Sunday, let's not read the resurrection story like we're reading the minutes from that meeting of men in the upper room. I want you to feel divine love coming for you. Coming for the parts of yourself where you carry the confusion and the shame and the regret and the sins that accompany every single life on this Earth. And I want you to feel that love coming to you in your joy, in your thrill at what is beautiful, in the kindness offered you for no good reason by a stranger, in the mercy you received once from a friend. Let the women at the tomb be our guides back into a love that's at work in our lives still, right now, right here. Today.

When you see someone reach out and love the world or anything in it with her bare hands, it can change you. If she reached out for the body of someone you already loved, you may just see how silly and shallow your proud and heady ways of knowing can be. And you might at least begin to want something different. You might at least begin to want to learn her better ways. Her ways. Mary's ways. Joanna's ways. Mary Magdalene's ways. Ways that might just lead you back into the outstretched arms of the risen Christ.