

With Burning Hearts
Luke 24:13-35

This scene from Luke's Gospel is one of people's very favorite post-Easter stories.

It captures the imagination.

It's so detailed – more so than many Bible passages.

The characters – familiar to many of us as they make their annual Eastertide appearance – draw us easily into their story.

Two disciples – so completely ordinary that one is never even named are walking, leaving Jerusalem after the Passover festival, after the crucifixion, heading for the village called Emmaus.

Luke is so detailed that he even notes the distance: it's a 7-mile road.

They're sad.

They're so completely caught up in their grief that they can't believe even one visitor to the city could have missed the events which have them so distraught.

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

This scene captures the imagination.

We can almost picture them:

passing from periodic silence to profound sighs;

walking slowly as dust covers their sandaled feet;

feeling lost, feeling confused, even, perhaps, feeling duped:

"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel!"

For me, the details are so real that (if we allow it) their story becomes a part of our own – as if we could see ourselves among these disciples

walking along in whatever turbulence we currently face in our own lives.

As if we were the ones mulling over what went wrong, how we got where we are.

Asking questions of ourselves:

Did we misplace our trust; or hope too much?

Were we just being too idealistic, naïve?

As if we are the ones unsure of our next dust-covered steps,
not knowing what the future holds.

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In asking such questions as what went wrong or concerning idealism, we could be talking about anything – from family strife to world relations.

We can put ourselves in the disciples' sandals – feeling let down and unsure of the future – when we think about any time we seem to have "trusted too much" or think of ourselves as having been too "naïve".

But, holding the image of today's story, I think about these 2 disciples' faith.

Their faith in their teacher Jesus, and their subsequent loss of whatever hope they'd held in him...

...and with it I connect our own modern faith:

how there are times when we may have placed trust in it,

gave it some power over our lives to lead us to something new;

and how that faith may have, at points, suddenly dissipated into nothing.

At times like these we walk along in a daze of loss, confusion or even feeling duped.

I believe that we all experience these moments to greater or lesser degree.  
 Christian mystics and theologians have written enough about such “dark night of the soul” experiences for us to acknowledge that it is rare for any seeker to avoid them completely –  
 whether we name them “dark nights”  
 or identify them as a crises of faith  
 or image them as this sorrow-filled journey toward Emmaus.

Many Christians face a loss of faith at some point.  
 Some of you may have experienced it as you felt need to leave the denomination of your family because of strongly held theological differences;  
 others may have known the loss as your faith community repealed your welcome when a divorce or an addiction was exposed,  
 or upon revelation of your minority sexual orientation;  
 some face crisis of faith when a son or daughter is injured,  
 or when your own health begins to decline.  
 I’ve seen a number of recent books and articles  
 telling the shadowy secrets even of clergy  
 who openly speak of their own loss of faith.

I think particularly of this excerpt from a letter of Mother Theresa’s,  
 found in her recent biography *Come Be My Light*:

*I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer —  
 no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ...  
 Where is my faith? — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness &  
 darkness. — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no faith<sup>i</sup>.*

Theresa’s words seem beyond startling from a person who’s life and ministry remain a major example of faith. Faith enacted amidst the inner turmoil of spirit and the outer turmoil of the poor with whom she worked.

Nobody is exempt:  
 from teens who are just coming to some form of “rational” thinking  
 which makes them believe it’s impossible to hold mind & spirit in dynamic tension  
 to skeptics who uncompromisingly pit faith against science.

And in these moments we walk a lonely road,  
 like these two despairing disciples...  
 “How can we have been so fooled” we might wonder,  
 “as to have believed in this Messiah stuff?”

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I think of Easter as prime time for progressive Christians to actually talk about such confusion.
 Not only because it fits the story – this Emmaus journey –
 but also because Easter is the very heart of our faith.
 Proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is central to the Christian path –
 and, for many of us within these walls,
 it’s one of the hardest things to reconcile in a 21st century world.

Two weeks out, we think we’re safely past Easter with all that resurrection talk behind us.
 We can continue coming to church and calling ourselves Christian

without having to focus on the parts that make us squirm,
the parts that might actually *make* us question our faith.

By this point, we've glossed over trying to figure out,
"can I really tell myself that God raised a man from the dead?
Or am I allowed to read this as metaphor or parable or something else entirely?"

It's finally safe to return to church –
and then along comes the relentless story of these 2,
attempting to do the same thing that we do
in making things make sense;
not sure of how to interpret events as they
trip over themselves to tell the stranger,

"Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him".

They don't know what to make of the tale, and neither do we.

And so we once more walk along the Emmaus road,
wondering what it is we really put our faith into.
Was it real? Can it be salvaged?

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Now, I'm sure that this is NOT the place that most of us find ourselves today.  
I am hopeful that the larger share of our gathered community continues to celebrate resurrection  
and lives into the joy of Easter alleluias.

And perhaps that is why it can be safer for us to talk about such challenges right now.  
To hear that, when dark nights of the soul *do* happen to us  
or to someone we love, we're not alone on that journey.  
To hear that, when we do face some loss of hope,  
we need not be afraid to talk about it *in church* –  
that it's already been named by these 2 in Luke's gospel;  
that it is *already a part of our story*.

In fact, when Jesus comes along and hears the lament they bring before him,  
he doesn't immediately make this better, reveal his presence;  
rather he turns to the comfort of familiar stories.  
He calls upon the disciples' tradition, their scriptures,  
to offer a beginning to their return to hope.

How do we get a message through to people's hearts? Tell a story.  
Most people won't remember a sermon the moment after it's finished, but tell people a story –  
watch a movie or read a novel – and the details come alive and stay with you...  
the *meaning* behind it comes alive,  
like the dust in the road and the weary faces of 2 down-hearted disciples.

It is within that conversation, with the stranger and with their scriptures, that the disciples begin to open.  
 They open themselves to this stranger and offer hospitality.  
 They open themselves to experiencing something new  
 even in the midst of their confusion and loss.  
 They open themselves to the greater story,  
 beyond their immediate questions and fears;  
 the story that they are now a part of.

This scene captures our imaginations,  
 and it's as if our own hearts burn with longing to be a part of the story.  
 To be the ones at an ordinary table serving our ordinary supper –  
 after a long day at work or a hard phone call from a friend –  
 and all of a sudden experience what it truly means to have the risen Christ among us.  
 To, in a mundane moment, glimpse what it means to have faith –  
 even if Christ does immediately vanish from sight once more.

And he does vanish.  
 Gone as if he never were ... except for the burning of their hearts.

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My question today is this:

Can faith stay with us even when the burning of our hearts eases,
 or if that burning has never been felt?

When our hearts beat in their regular cadence
 and once more all we see is an ordinary loaf of bread?

Do we need these moments of burning realization
 in order to carry on with the common meal laid out,
 in order to live a life of faith amidst the very real crises in our lives?
 In order to share the bread with one another,
 with those beyond these walls,
 or with our own selves?

I think again of Mother Teresa, whose life inspired thousands, perhaps millions of people,
 despite her own inner turmoil of faith.

One author said this of her:

“In a dark time she is a burning and shining light;
 in a cruel time, a living embodiment of Christ’s gospel of love;
 in a godless time, the Word dwelling among us,
 full of grace and truth.

For this, all who have the inestimable privilege of
 knowing her, or knowing of her, must be eternally grateful”ⁱⁱ.

The bread that she shared, the Christ that she served,
 was revealed in the people with whom she lived and worked.

I do not have answers today to the questions of faith.

Yet this is what we do when faith falters. We come together.

We attempt to find ourselves again as part of the story.

We come again to the basic rituals, to the ordinariness of a table laid out.

There is nothing special in this table itself.

We can sit down to it together and experience *nothing*...unless we open.

Unless we make the invitation:

“stay with us, because it is almost evening

and the day is now nearly over”.

We can make the choice to let him continue walking down the road a stranger,
or we can open the doors of our hearts.

And that’s the choice that makes it possible for us to finally see the Christ –
at the table,

in the breaking of the bread,

in the sharing it with others –

whether that be in spiritual communion or physical caring
as Mother Teresa so ably embodied.

Our faith does sometimes enter “dark nights of the soul” and journeys to Emmaus –
but it is only part of the story.

Because whether we want to analyze the miracle or let it lay,

the mystery at the heart of our faith is that

Christ is risen and walks beside us.

Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"*, ed. by Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. (New York: Doubleday, 2007) p. 187

ⁱⁱ p. 334