

April 23, 2023

Year A: Easter III (Acts 2:14a, 36–41; 1 Peter 1:17–23; Luke 24:13–35)

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The road to Emmaus story is comfortably familiar to all of us, as long as you don't examine it too closely, or try to make sense of it in any straightforward way. But we're used to that: we know that reading scripture the same way we read a newspaper doesn't work. If we read it in a modern context, we might just as well suggest the two travellers should have whipped out their mobile phones to call everyone back in Jerusalem with their news.

For a start, we've jumped back two weeks: this story happens on the same day that the tomb was found empty, and these two followers of Jesus are leaving Jerusalem and going home. As they walk along the deserted road, all at once there is another person with them. He starts talking to them, but they don't know who he is. Later on they realize it's Jesus – the very same person they have been on the road with for years; the most important person in their lives. But they didn't recognize him – and as soon as they did, he disappeared.

Puzzling, to say the least! First of all, who are these two travellers? Luke says that one of them is called Cleopas, and the other is – well – somebody else. Luke doesn't say who. John's gospel never mentions Cleopas at all, but it does mention his wife. According to John, the wife of Cleopas was present at the crucifixion. John says that she was a family member, that Jesus was her nephew, but that's all.

If you pick apart the Greek grammar in this passage, it's possible that these travellers could both be male, or it could be a male and a female, in which case it might well have been Cleopas and his wife. The early church systematically edited women out of the gospels in more than a few places. The early church fathers were not comfortable with women playing a prominent role in the story; they felt it damaged their credibility if women were included in religious conversations. Sometimes they changed female

names to male names, and even messed with the pronouns. What started out here as Cleopas and his wife, Mary, could have been tweaked to suggest that it was more likely Cleopas with his buddy, Murray!

Either way, Luke obviously didn't think it mattered who they were. As far as Luke is concerned, the special thing about these two people seems to be that they weren't special. Nobody important; just two of the people who had been with Jesus. Followers; family, maybe; people who cared; people who had been in Jerusalem when Jesus died.

And they were going home. They weren't rejoicing about the empty tomb; they were still stuck at the crucifixion. It was all over as far as they were concerned. They had followed Jesus. They had heard the message and been interested enough to follow, but now it was over. The day after the crucifixion was the Sabbath, and Jews were not allowed to travel on the Sabbath, so they had to wait until the day after to say their goodbyes and head out to get home before dark, no doubt feeling very sad, discouraged, disappointed – and maybe a little afraid.

But regardless of that, they still responded to the 'stranger' they met on the road with hospitality. They still welcomed him. They worried about him walking on in the dark all alone. They offered him supper and a place to stay. They cared about someone they didn't know and treated him with respect and kindness.

Responding with fear rather than hospitality would have been quite understandable. The roads were notoriously dangerous anyway, and these people were leaving Jerusalem with good reason to be afraid of being persecuted. But they didn't respond with fear; they responded with kindness. That tells us something about them: they were living out their faith, even when their faith was shaken. It takes quite an effort sometimes to set aside your own fear and sorrow and think about others.

So they were ordinary people, making an effort to be faithful, even though, just now, their own journey was sad and sorrowful. They were walking a hard road, and their faith was badly shaken. They had doubts; they had questions; but doubts and questions are not the enemy of faith: fear is.

At some point in life, we all end up walking that road. We all struggle to hang onto faith in the face of sorrow. We make the effort to live faithfully when we don't feel like it. And the simple good news in this story is that we don't have to do it alone. It took these travellers a while to see that, but then the simple good news is often so simple that we miss it completely. We look for complicated answers and miss the obvious ones. God was walking with them, but it took a while for them to see that.

The conversation with this stranger sounds odd to us. We would find it a bit odd for a stranger to butt in and say "What were you talking about?" But they didn't tell him to mind his own business; they included him; they told him what was troubling their hearts. And what did he say? "How foolish you are!"

Now, in English, that sounds just plain rude, but the Greek word translated as 'foolish' isn't as impolite as it sounds. It means 'looking at it from the wrong point of view.' He wasn't belittling their intelligence or their sorrows. He was putting them into perspective. He showed them that they had been dwelling on the wrong thing. He listened to their worries, and he said, "I can help you deal with that!"

I'll bet most of us, if we think about it, can remember times when someone unlikely has said something, or just turned up at a particular moment, and it has cast a whole new light on our troubles, and changed our perspective completely. We all have these fleeting, random encounters with unlikely, improbable and unwitting sources. And there may well have been a lot more that we missed!

These travellers would have missed this message altogether if they'd been too afraid to welcome a stranger. They would have missed it if they had been too wrapped up in their own troubles to put some effort into talking about their faith. And they certainly would have missed it if they hadn't taken the time to invite the stranger to eat and broken bread together. This was not a passive revelation; it required some work.

First they put themselves out to help someone else. Then they talked about their faith and how they understood it. Then they shared a familiar ritual together. Only then did they really *see* that Jesus had been with them all along. They had to *do* a lot to be receptive to God's presence. And then they got a glimpse of the divine.

Only a glimpse: not enough to grasp and hold onto for ever. Not enough to answer all their questions, because it is not given to us to have all our questions answered. But enough to reassure them that the divine was still there. Enough to make them turn back towards Jerusalem with new hope.

The simple message of this story is that there is no road so hard or so sad that God will not be walking with you – often in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Your job is to keep faith, and to keep listening, so you don't miss them.

Amen.