

Reflection: Road to Emmaus

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.
Amen.

While waiting for a first appointment in the reception room of a new dentist, a woman noticed his certificate, which bore his full name. Suddenly, she remembered that a tall, handsome boy with the same name had been in her high school class some 50 years ago. Upon seeing him, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. The balding, gray-haired man with the deeply lined face was too old to have been her classmate. After he had examined the woman's teeth, she asked him if he had attended the local high school. "Yes," he replied. "When did you graduate?" She asked. He answered, "In 1952." "Why, you were in my class!" she exclaimed. He looked at her closely and then asked, "What did you teach?"

It is a case of mistaken identity or more to the point a case of unrecognized identity. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus have no idea who joins them for their travel—they simply invite the stranger to walk with them. The road to Emmaus is one of seven post-resurrection stories, and, like the others, it is a little ghostly; the stranger whom the disciples do not recognize at first, who turns out to be the Messiah, who vanishes from their sight as soon as they know who he is. The crucifixion stories are not like this. They are one hundred percent solid. Jesus is nailed to the cross with a nameplate tacked above his head, where he dies in front of a hundred eyewitnesses. No case of mistaken identity here. No sudden appearance and disappearance. His death is real.

His resurrection, on the other hand, is largely rumor. Someone said that someone said his tomb was empty, but that could mean anything. Maybe his body was stolen. Maybe he revived and walked away. It was women who first spread the story, and everyone knew how they embellished things. Even those who saw him in the flesh had a hard time convincing anyone else it was true. Thomas did not buy it, not until he had seen for himself, and seven resurrection stories do not go very far. Jesus does not appear to everyone before he ascends to heaven, which left plenty of people to weigh the evidence for themselves, to listen to the testimony of those who were there and to decide if and what they would believe.

This, in a nutshell, is the situation of the after-Easter Church. And it is our situation today—a kind of remedial resurrection course today. One of those, "If you didn't get it the first time," kind of stories with all the pictures and words you need to hear in case you happen to miss the real thing on Easter Sunday. And even if you experienced worship on Easter Sunday, it is possible you still walked away in disbelief and doubt. And if that is the case—then here is your refresher to help you find some ground on which to stand. The resurrection is no hoax. None of us was there, for the real death or the rumored resurrection. All of us must decide what to make of the truth of what we have heard. But if it is all true, then we have more than hearsay to make up our minds. If the Lord is risen indeed, then we may base our decision on our own encounter with the living God. The question is, what is his address? Where do we go to make that encounter happen and to experience for ourselves the joy of a face to face engagement with the Lord of Life, the Savior of the world?

For Luke, the answer is: somewhere on the road to Emmaus. Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us the story of what happened on that road, but everyone has walked it at one time or another. It is the road you walk when your team has lost, your dreams are crushed, your loved one has died—the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again. It is the road of deep disappointment, and walking it is the active movement of sadness, just like the two disciples in the reading for today. It takes two hours to walk seven miles, and that is how long they have to talk

over the roller coaster ride of the past three days. The trial, the crucifixion, the silent procession to the tomb. And then the women's vision of angels, the empty grave. Real death. Rumored resurrection.

They are talking it all over when the stranger comes up behind them and asks them what they are talking about, so that they stop in their tracks to look at him. "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Cleopas asks him, but the truth is they are both glad for his company and so they walk with him, matching their stride to his as they tell him everything they know.

They tell him how things had looked so promising at first, when Jesus impressed everyone with his knowledge of Scripture and miraculous acts, and then how things had gone downhill from there—so far down the hill that there was nothing left for them to do but to go back home, dragging their dreams in the dust behind them. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel," they say to the stranger. "We had hoped." We thought he was the one. We believed that things might really change for the better. We had hoped things would be different, but we were wrong. He died. It is over now. No more dreams. No more promises. "We had hoped he was the one."

"We had hoped," are the words many of us are speaking today.

We had hoped graduation would still happen.

We had hoped to be present for the birth of our new grandchild.

We had hoped to go on our honeymoon.

We had hoped to keep our job.

We had hoped to buy our first house.

We had hoped our marriage would survive.

We had hoped our grandmother would survive the virus.

We had hoped others would keep us safe by staying home.

We had hoped our daughter would have had the necessary protective equipment in her nursing.

We had hoped our world was more ready for a pandemic.

We had hoped that the common good would be more important than the freedoms of the individual.

That is when their walking partner explodes at them. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" "How foolish to believe that your needs are more important than the needs of all of us collectively together," Jesus might say.

"Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" If you had read your Bibles, Jesus might have said, you would understand everything that has happened and none of it would be a surprise to you. It is right there in black and white; the Messiah is not the one who wins the power struggle; he is the suffering servant, the broken one, who comes into his glory with his wounds still visible. Those holes in his hands and feet are the proof that he is who he says he is, because the way you recognize the Messiah—the chosen one of God—and his followers—is not by their muscle, not by their power, but by their scars.

Which means that they are not to hate the painful parts of their lives anymore. Which means that they don't have to look at their defeats as failures anymore. Which means that they are not to fear their enemies anymore, not even death itself. Regardless of all they know, these disciples are to follow their leader into the scariest, darkest, most dangerous places in the world armed with nothing but a first aid kit, because the disciples, like Jesus, are not fighters but healers—wounded healers—whose educations are their own hurts and pains.

The stranger begins to tell the two disciples about Moses and working his way through the prophets of the old Testament. The stranger opens Scriptures to them and they hang on his every word. They are wounded, and what the stranger is telling them is good news. Maybe they are not the losers after all.

Maybe the rumors of resurrection are true. Just maybe there is reason to resurrect their crucified hope. When they arrive at their village and he shakes their hands goodbye, they do not want him to go. They have not heard enough of his words and so they invite him to stay and he does. But his house guest, this stranger, acts like he owns the place. It is their table, their food, but when the three sit down together, it is the stranger, the guest, who acts as host, who reaches out, takes the bread, says the blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Maybe it is the strangeness of this man who, though guest, acts as host or maybe it is in the breaking of the bread—that familiar action—something they have seen him do before on a green hillside by the Sea of Galilee with five loaves and two fish or maybe in an upper room with bread and Passover wine. The stranger takes, blesses, and breaks the bread only to offer the pieces to the two disciples who begin to see through their darkness—the light that is standing in front of them offering bread. And as soon as they understand who he is, Jesus is gone.

The good news is the blindness and the broken heartedness of the two disciples does not keep their Savior from coming to them. Jesus does not offer his after Easter appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the discontent. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home with words of, “we had hoped...” on their lips.

Jesus seems to prefer working with broken people, with broken dreams, in a broken world. If someone hands him a whole loaf of bread, he will take it, bless it, break it, and give it, and he will do the same things with his own flesh and blood, because that is the way of life God has called him to show the rest of us; to take what we have been given, whether we like it or not, and to bless it, to say thank you for it, and to break it because that is the only way it can be shared and to hand it around—not to eat it all by ourselves but to find someone to eat it with, so that the broken bread may bring all of us broken ones together into one body, where we may leave our words of, “We had hoped...” for words of, “He is risen!” We come to the empty tomb to celebrate that fact together. Just in case we may not have caught on. Just in case we were asleep when God moved the mountains, stilled the water, and caused all of creation to be silent for that brief moment when Jesus rose from the dead and walked into our lives again. We leave the words of, “We had hoped,” for the words of Jesus—“I am the resurrection and the life!” Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.