

## **APRIL 26**

The gospel reading for today is the familiar story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus who are met by Jesus (Lk 24). Most of us, I would wager, can give the outline of the story: two sad disciples of Jesus meet a mysterious stranger on the road; in conversation the mystery man's words deeply touch their hearts and they ask him to stay with them, which he does; before he "leaves" he reveals himself as the risen Lord. Warm and fuzzy, right?

Not so fast, faith fans. There's a lot going on here that is easily missed, and what we miss makes a big difference to how we understand why the gospel writer we call Luke included this story and how it is helpful today.

Three bits stand out for me: how the men disbelieved the women's account of meeting the risen Jesus (Lk 22); the poignant phrase the disciples use to describe their sense of desolation and loss, "but we had hoped"; their request that the stranger stay with them.

First, the setting of the "Road to Emmaus" story is important. No one has, in Luke's account, actually yet met the resurrected Jesus. The story about meeting angels and the tomb being empty given by the women who went to do the customary funerary preparations was not only disbelieved, but the word Luke uses, ("leros" for all you bible Greek lovers out there) has a very negative spin—it is used elsewhere to describe tale-telling women who say things that are malicious nonsense. So, the angels' good news of the resurrection to the women has become dangerous, even wicked, gossip to be dismissed (one might even suppose there was fear another Judas in their midst—perhaps a woman this time—looking to betray Jesus' followers by spouting craziness that draws official attention?).

If we remember that Peter was accused of being a disciple and denied knowing Jesus to save his own skin (Lk 22:56-57), we can imagine the idea of having hysterical women tell a crazy story that could get them all crucified could readily prompt frightened men to go past saying the story is silly to saying it imperils the group. Peter, to his credit, went to see for himself and found things as the women had said, but we don't know what happens next with him until later.

But we do know from the dialogue between the two disciples in our present text that they had heard something of what happened at the tomb. What they came away with was that in a literal sense, Jesus was both dead and gone. Not even a corpse to prepare, no real funeral to have. So, they were making their way out of Jerusalem, away from the trouble, danger, grief, and loss.

It is in such a mood that Jesus finds them on the road to Emmaus. When he breaks in on them and asks what they are discussing, (surely the most wonderful bit of rudeness since time began! I mean, who does this kind of interrupting in ordinary life?), they use that awful, grief-filled expression, "But we had hoped...". We all know what this sounds like on the lips of heart-broken people—perhaps even from our own mouths.

You know what it is to say it and hear it, “we had hoped”: that the doctor would have good news, that we’d have another chance, that another would feel as we do, that the sobriety would last, that the money would not run out, and so on. In short, that our hopes would be confirmed and not our fears.

These two go on to say all their hopes, the upswell of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah (at last!), had come crashing down, like that line in the James Taylor song, “Fire and Rain”: “sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground”. Their grief is palpable.

What on earth can be said to that? Nineteen hundred years later, mid-1800’s American poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote these famous lines in an otherwise more easily forgettable poem, “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, “It might have been”. (Maud Muller). This is what devours the disciples’ spirits. They had hoped...it might have been...it is their moment of expressing their awareness and sadness and loss. If this doesn’t break your heart when you give yourself over to imagining it with your best efforts of calling a thing to mind, I don’t know what could.

Jesus doesn’t deny their feelings, he deepens their perception. We’re told that he opened the scriptures and began to enlarge their capacity to take in what he was saying. They are captivated, their attention is gripped and they feel their hearts burning as he speaks. Most importantly, their response to him is what prompts their invitation to stay with them, and saves the day (and them) from oblivion.

When I read this passage I often think about the rich young ruler in Mark’s gospel. Remember him? He’s the one whom Jesus, upon seeing him, loved him. When the young man asked what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him to sell everything and follow him. This the young man could not bear to do. He leaves and we never hear of him again.

I suppose the reason I think of that wealthy young man is that he could not cope with what was being asked of him, which was a new way of thinking. The heartbroken and dismayed disciples are surely two “whom Jesus loved” also, even though they are not among the twelve. They are somehow sensitive enough to the stirring in themselves and aware enough of the interaction they’re having to realize that this moment on the road as night is drawing near may be more than they dared hope for in these awful days. As the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, the mysterious stranger makes to leave their company, but they do a greater and more wonderful thing than even they know. They offer ordinary hospitality and companionship in an extraordinary moment out of their own need, doubt, grief, and even danger. They become the first people in Luke’s gospel to encounter and receive the presence of the risen Christ.

So much depends on their willingness to extend their invitation, so much hangs on them being aware that the stranger’s message—strange as it sounds—sets their hearts ablaze.

There is a famous poem about a larger sense of things depending on bits of ordinary reality, small parts connecting to form greater wholes we recognize later, tiny turns and choices that bring a fresh awareness into our lives and make all things new. Doubtless, you've encountered the poem before. You may even be able to recite it:

So much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens. (XXII from *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams, 1923)

The plain matter-of-factness about what is laid out by the poem gives way to greater depth of perception when we turn our attention more deliberately to this seemingly trivial bit of writing. I'm not trying to interject a lecture on modernist poetry here, but I will say that everything you see, even in the placement of the words, is deliberately put before the reader. One must slow down the reading because of the arrangement, take in the particulars under (de-pends—literally “hangs from”) the opening statement, and ponder the significance of this poetic “snapshot” (Williams was much influenced by the photography of Alfred Stieglitz). Few poems have had such a wide popular culture influence—references turn up in cartoons, novels, and tv shows.

I trust by now you are seeing that Luke is offering us something extraordinary, a look into the moment when Jesus, in opening these two disciples understanding of the scriptures more deeply, is also asking them to step forward into a new way of living. They do it and ask him to stay with them. In a little while he changes what that invitation will mean for all of us, for he is known to them in the breaking of the bread, and the Lord, in his resurrection body, departs from them even as their recognition of his presence will continue down to this day in the breaking of the bread, which we shall resume, God willing, some day soon.