

What Will You Do With the Story?

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpretations of Experiences

Text: Luke 24:31; Romans 8:38-39

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In this Eastertide season we have been hearing the stories of those who had an experience of the crucified Jesus as present with them, to them, as a living reality in their midst.

Peter thought he was going to return to fishing in Galilee; Paul was going to stamp out the followers of the Way in Damascus; Mary, heart broken, was weeping at the tomb; then they experienced the living Lord, present to them.

Flowing from those post-Easter experiences there grew a community of people - Jewish people, who believed that Jesus was God's anointed one to bring about the Kingdom of God as the end of the Age approached. Thus, there was a community of Jesus people. They told their story, shared their experience and the movement grew.

We are part of that movement nearly 2000 years later. And you are part of that movement we call Christianity, I suspect in all cases, because you were born into a family that was part of the Christian faith family. Today we celebrate your belonging in this community, this family we call Christ Community, which is part of the global Christian family. You belong. We have given you a candle of faith for you to nurture and keep aflame.

In this faith family, we have a story; it is the story of Jesus. In the season of Lent we reflected each week on the theme of Jesus as the Human Face of God. In Jesus we see embodied in a human person what God is like. That is our faith conviction. That is our story.

In this faith family, when a child is born we light a candle from the Pascal Candle as a sign that the light of Jesus lives in the child and parents promise to tell their child the story of the faith - Jesus whose way is God's way, whose truth is God's truth, whose life is the life of God. We tell the story of Jesus. He is our model of faith and of life.

In the church, we tell the story, too - in the liturgy of Sunday morning, in the sermon, in Worship Center, and, now we can say after the last two years, in "The Stepping Stones" study. In your home, in your faith community, you have heard the story told and you have seen the story lived out in your family and in this community.

Now we come to the time to hand you a second candle. The first candle was received on your behalf; this one is handed to you. The first candle, it was suggested to your parents, should be lighted on the anniversary of your baptism, telling you the story of that day when you were marked by the waters of Baptism. Now we are suggesting that you re-light this candle on the anniversary of this moment.

May 17, 1999

May 17, 2000

May 17, 2001.

I don't know if you will; it is your responsibility now. Some of you, I am sure, will place the candle in some prominent place - on a dresser or a bookshelf. You don't need to wait until May 17 comes around again; maybe four months from now, feeling anxious about a new school year, you will light it as a reminder that you are not alone, that you belong, that you are loved eternally by God.

Some of you may not even get home with the candle today. I know that and I know that God will not love you less. There comes a time when you have to determine how it will be with you and the journey of faith.

We have told you the story, assured you that you belong to the family of God, that God is for you and nothing can ever separate you from that love of God which came to expression in Jesus Christ. Now you hold the candle in your own hands.

What will you do with the story?

To be sure, you cannot honestly tell me that today. Let's recognize that. Demanding some lifetime commitment from you at this point in your life is unrealistic. That is why we are putting a whole new light on this passage into young adulthood.

There is much for you to discern, discover and decide in these days. Much is happening to you, biologically in your body, socially in your relationships, educationally in your life choices.

This is hardly the time to confront you with a spiritual life choice. For now, rest in the security of God's love, your spiritual family's affirmation and trust, and our promise to be here for you.

And then the moment will come when you face the question of your own spiritual journey. You will come to an awareness of the Mystery of God and the wonder of life. And you will know where you stand, in what or whom you believe and that to which you will commit yourself. That is the way it happens authentically.

I read the story from Luke of the two disciples walking home to Emmaus from Jerusalem, sad at heart because Jesus had been crucified. They are joined by a third person whom they do not recognize. He inquires about their conversation and they relate what had just happened. They even tell the stranger that women had gone to the tomb and found it empty and had a vision of angels who said he was alive. Others, to verify the women's story, went and also found the tomb empty, but still there was no Easter faith, no faith in a living, risen Lord.

They came to the village and Jesus made as though he would go on, but they invited him to come home with them as evening was approaching. He entered their home and, strangely, at the evening meal acted as host. He took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road ..."

Well, it may have been evening, but they returned immediately to Jerusalem; they found their companions gathered and what did they do? They told their story. Their companions knew it, too, because they reported, "The Lord is risen indeed and he has appeared to Simon!" (or Peter, as we more familiarly know him.) There you have it.

Not the empty tomb, not, that is, some objective proof, some irrefutable argument from evidence, but the experience of the living Lord - that created Easter faith. It is an experience of the Presence, awareness, wonder. And such moments of awareness still are the only way to one's own faith. That is what Luke is saying.

John Dominic Crossan, a scholar studying the historical Jesus, says of the story from Luke, "Emmaus never happened; Emmaus always happens."

That is what I want you to understand at this significant moment in your lives - We have told you the story. Your parents have told you the story. We have spoken of God, of Jesus as the word of God in human flesh, of his way, his death, his resurrection. And growing up, you have learned the stories, essentially believed it all to be true.

But now you are entering a new stage of your growth toward adulthood and maturity. Now you can no longer take it all in secondhand, believing because you are told it is so. Now you begin to question, to wonder, to probe for yourself - Now you hear the story in terms of your own unfolding experience. Now you

must ask, "Is it true?" But, not simply true in that these things happened and the Christian tradition has held these things to be true and life-transforming for 2000 years. Now the question is, "Is it true for me?" "What will I do with the story?"

Some of you will follow quite naturally. Some of you will struggle a bit. Some of you may need to create some distance between you and the family faith. We are all different. And it is important that we all be given the freedom to find our own way authentically.

Don't force the spiritual vision. Don't panic as though you may be abandoned. But, do keep your mind and heart open to God's Spirit. One day walking the road to Emmaus, or receiving bread at this table, or in conversation with a parent, friend, or lover, or when a child is born or a loved one dies - you will inexplicably find your heart burning, your eyes will be open, you will see in the face of Jesus the God Who gave you life, Who has never abandoned you, and Who will never let you go.

And maybe you will rummage around in some old trunk holding personal items, photo albums, and a candle - you will light it - and you will know that you are held in the grip of grace. Your eyes will mist over, you will hear angels sing and you will know the wonder of the love of God from which you will never be separated.

Such an experience stamps us indelibly. We are transformed. Such an experience, however, is not once for all - thank God, there are further places along the journey when again and again we experience, we know, we believe and we commit ourselves anew.

It is the human journey in its deepest dimension. It is such awareness that makes us human, embodied Spirit, children of the Spirit in the Family of God.