

Easter

Two Witnesses

Although as times have changed, church sanctuaries are now more likely to be full on Christmas than on Easter, it's hard to over-state just how pivotal the resurrection of Jesus is for Christian faith. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, our personal salvation and our hope for eternal life depend entirely on Jesus being raised from the dead. In that monumental chapter Paul states it in the strongest possible terms. He writes, "[I]f Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain ... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (1Corinthians 15:14,17) Because if Christ has not conquered the power of sin and death, how is it possible for us be raised with him to walk in newness of life? (See Romans 6:1-11)

But that, in a sense, is only the beginning. Because it's not only our personal salvation that's at stake, but the fate of the entire world. If Jesus has not risen, then the transforming presence of the kingdom of God has not come into the world and the world's destiny is left entirely in our own hands.

If Jesus has not risen, then we are like Cleopas and his companion walking down the road on that Sunday afternoon, who utter some of the saddest words spoken in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion: "[Jesus] was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people ...But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." "But we had hoped ..." Because if it was true, as

it seemed to them, that Jesus' death was the end of the story, then those hopes were in vain. Because as they say it, Jesus may have been a mighty prophet, but he could not have really been, as the crowd shouted just seven days earlier, "the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

Jesus was dead, and their hopes were dashed. As far as they were concerned, the report of the women claiming they had seen a vision of angels was nothing but an idle tale. Even Peter's report that the tomb was empty didn't necessarily prove anything. So, although we're not told exactly why they were walking to Emmaus, it's most likely that they were on their way home. Jesus was dead and their hope had died with him. There was no reason to hang around Jerusalem any more.

I came across a quote from Frederick Buechner who describes that walk to Emmaus this way:

[Emmaus is] the place we go in order to escape—a bar, a movie, whenever it is we throw up our hands and say "Let the whole damned thing go to hang. It makes no difference anyway" ... Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car ... or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends.

(Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 85-86)

What is your Emmaus? Where do you go to try to escape when hoping and believing has become too hard?

But it's right then that this stranger sidles up to them. And he has a dramatically different perspective on the situation. God hasn't failed them! Their hopes were not in vain! They just don't understand what the prophets and Jesus himself had been saying all along. He calls them "slow of heart. The problem wasn't that they hadn't seen and heard it all—it just hadn't sunk in. Jesus' words had not connected with them deeply enough for them to be able to believe that there was more to God's plan than they could imagine. In fact, even though the risen Lord was standing right there beside them they couldn't recognize him.

But how do they get to the point where they can believe? They get there the way we all still get there—through the testimony of two witnesses—what we would call Word and Sacrament.

It turns out that the truth about Jesus was there right in front of them all along. Everything—even Jesus' suffering and death-- been happening just as the prophets had declared. Jesus' suffering in Jerusalem, and even his death should not have dashed their hopes. Because victory over sin and death and the forces of hell would come through suffering and death—and resurrection. And so that afternoon as they walked together Jesus led them through a Bible study to end all Bible studies, as "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

The truth about Jesus had been there all along to be discovered in the testimony of the first witness—the Word. And it turns out that Jesus himself is right

there with them, too—something they will only discover from the second witness, the breaking of the bread. Luke writes that “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed, and broke it and gave it to them...” and “*then* their eyes were opened and they recognized him ...”

But what I've always found fascinating about this story is the rest of the verse, “and he vanished from their sight.” I've never known what to make of that. Why was he in such a hurry to get out of there, and why in such an apparently supernatural way?

As I reflect on this, I think it may not be so much about them as it is something that's there for us. Because – in my experience, at least – the defining moments of faith come in fleeting moments like those two travelers had when they recognized Jesus as he broke the bread. For me they come in times when my heart burns within me as I gain some new and powerful insight in reading or studying or hearing the Word. Or they come in intense times of Christian community, maybe even sharing with other at the Lord's table, when suddenly things I may have believed in theory take on flesh.

These moments may not come completely out of the blue—there's often something that leads up to them or tills the soil for them. Like Cleopas and his companion the ground may be broken up by sorrow or disillusionment—or something else that leads us to try to flee to our own version of Emmaus. But then something happens and we're left with some fresh assurance that reorients our lives.

When your newsletter finally gets to you, you'll find in it a note I wrote about a book I've just read called *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. It's written by Kate Bowler, a young woman, who along with being a mother and a wife is also a theologian. When she was in her mid-thirties, over the space of just a couple of days, she received a diagnosis of stage four colon cancer, underwent life-altering surgery, and was told that she probably had less than a year to live. I'd like to read an extended selection from what she writes about meeting God in that experience:

In those first few days after my diagnosis, when I was in the hospital, I couldn't see my son, I couldn't get out of bed, and I couldn't say for certain that I would survive the year. But I felt as though I'd uncovered something like a secret about faith. Even in lucid moments, I found my feelings so difficult to explain. I kept saying the same thing: "I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back."

At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.

When they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others, a world of those who, like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams they thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made.

That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I had grown so accustomed to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it. So I began to ask friends, theologians, historians, pastors I knew, and nuns I liked, What am I going to do when it's gone? And they knew exactly what I meant because they had either felt it themselves or read about it in great works of Christian theology. St. Augustine called it "the sweetness." Thomas Aquinas called it something mystical like "the prophetic light." But all said yes, it will go. The feelings will go. The sense of

God's presence will go. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to get it back.

But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, they said, they will leave an imprint. I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God. It is not proof of anything. And it is nothing to boast about. It was simply a gift ... Yes. *That is the God I believe in.*

[Bowler, Kate. *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (pp. 121-122). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.]

(As of an interview with her I heard a few weeks ago, Kate is still going, by the way.)

Kate is a faithful Christian, an intelligent and thoughtful theologian who has thought long and hard about why bad things happen, and knows all the standard ways Christians try to make sense of it. But her real answer came on her own version of the road to Emmaus.

If someone asks me why I believe that Jesus rose from the dead, I don't begin with an intellectual answer. I know that he lives because I've met him—in moments that have changed me and the direction of my life. None of them have been dramatic enough to make for a best-selling memoir—but there have been enough of those flashes of insight on the road to Emmaus, enough of those times when my heart has burned within me as I've met him in the Word, that I know in the depths of my being that Christ has risen indeed.

We can't make those moments happen. They may come at the most unlikely times and in the most unexpected places to go. But as in Kate's story, we might meet Jesus in places no one would ever choose to go. But we might meet him by going to the places where Jesus spent his time—by not shying

away from places where there is suffering or injustice. We might meet him as we spend time in the company of those who have taken up their own crosses and are following him.

And above all, Jesus has left us with two witnesses—the Word and Sacraments—and so we might increase the likelihood that we will meet him by being in places where the Scriptures are opened, and where we can come to his table.

This morning we invite you to the Lord's table. In our Presbyterian and Reformed understanding of this sacrament, we believe that we come to his table not just to remember that Jesus died for us, but that through the power of the Holy Spirit he becomes alive and present to us right now as we share the bread and cup together. On this Easter morning especially, we come here to look through and beyond Jesus' suffering to meet our risen Lord.

Maybe you're on your own road to Emmaus today. But just maybe, too, Jesus is already walking beside you, ready to make himself known to you in the breaking of the bread. His table is set before us Please come!

*Rev. David Spaulding
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