

A EASTER 3 2020

The detail of this story that has always leapt out at me is that these disciples on the way to Emmaus have heard the women's story, know that other disciples have found the tomb empty ... AND on the very same day they are leaving town. The explanation for that would appear to be right there in the text – “we had hoped that he would be the one who would redeem Israel” and for these disciples at least, that hope died on Calvary. Whatever followed was irrelevant.

But this year we read these post resurrection Gospels through a different lens. Absent this year is the great cultural pantechicon of Easter – the bunnies and bonnets and brunches all ended up somewhere in a roadside ditch, and we are left finding our way across the scorched earth of that first Easter, surrounded by loss at every turn, and yet sensing the emergence of something new. Like every one of Jesus' disciples, we have had imposed upon us what we never sought or even imagined, this grueling, overwhelming labor of constructing a new way of being out of cracked lives, and broken hearts, and shattered dreams. We are still too deep in loss to claim much joy, but there is movement And so this year, these disciples on the road to Emmaus sound different, they speak to another part of our hearts because we are closer to their experience.

There a public service-type add about mental health that has probably popped up on your screen recently: it begins “If you notice someone's behavior has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic” which is grimly amusing because whose hasn't? Every one of us, including our young children, are somewhere on this spectrum of grief, and so we now grasp at a deeper level something about these Emmaus disciples, and the entire surviving Christian community: how grief distorts and confuses, it sends us in wrong directions, it places us where we don't want to be, and because squarely facing grief demands a lot of work – hard, intentional, exhausting work – it invites avoidance. Easier to leave town, emotionally, psychologically, if not always physically; power your way thru, and learn nothing.

Jürgen Moltmann observes that there are numerous accounts of ghostly apparitions in every religious tradition, but what distinguishes Jesus' post-resurrection appearances is the speaking and hearing of words, and words without which it would have been impossible to identify the one who appeared with the crucified Jesus. We see this over and over again – with the women, with the eleven, and here again on the road to Emmaus. The disciples encounter a total stranger, unrecognizable to them as the Jesus they once knew, but who becomes recognizable to them in his speaking to them, and finally at table. The failure of everyone to instantly recognize the risen Jesus insists that there is something here that has to be learned, a connection that has to be created, or at least re-created.

It is Jesus' words that have the disciples' hearts burning within them, because he reveals this unimagined continuity between cross and resurrection: what appeared to be their total abandonment by God is revealed as God's total investment in them. Jesus weaves the disciples'

grief and confusion and disorientation into a broader narrative, one that is also being written by God and not by fear or violence, cowardice, failure, panic, and he does this by re-presenting the scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the great story of salvation that is always being written by God, and interpreting to them the things about himself.

Aren't these the words that you and I need to hear ourselves, the words that stitch together the past as we knew it, with this present time, and the future that God is preparing for us?

These disciples are taken back to the very beginning of scriptures that they thought they knew, and step by step they are taught a new way of reading the same story, this time in the light of the dead-and-risen Christ. With that they are given a new way of imagining God and themselves and the whole order of creation, and with that dawns hope, and the possibility of joy. Always, at the heart of the Easter experience, is this reconstruction and redirection of understanding, so that we too can go back to the beginning of our own story, and perceive what we have never recognized before. We learn for the first time what we thought we already understood, because now we see our lives in the light of Jesus, from the perspective of Christ and not just our own, and we are invited to participate in that divine work of our own recreation, laying aside grief and anxiety, forgiving old hurts and our own failures, expunging our embarrassments, revisiting with tolerance and compassion what once caused us so much pain, finally released from every jealousy and resentment and intolerance.

We share the same scriptures with many people, but WE read them in the same way these disciples were taught, with the conviction that Jesus – the touch and the voice and the gaze of God – shines back over all the scriptures, and over all of human history, even our own personal history. And this is what makes our own hearts burn within us, when the scriptures are opened to us, when we experience the grace and mercy and beauty of Jesus speaking to us through the text, when we see the same old data of our lives, the old information now rearranged and somehow signifying something different, liberating us, encouraging us, and making sense of what once appeared to us to be just failure and loss, chance and coincidence.

I'm sure that I mention every time we read this Gospel that no one knows where Emmaus was, that there was never a place that fitted this description: it belongs nowhere, and so it can be found anywhere. It is the place that grief so effortlessly carries us to - away from our families, out of our faith communities, our social networks. But it is also the place where love finds us, and with that hope. And just as the location is uncertain, so is the timing – grief follows its own calendar; as Bishop Mary used to say: it takes the time it takes. Was it the day of Resurrection when all those who were traumatized by Jesus death found a bridge into joy, or did it take weeks, month, years to construct? Emmaus itself is that place somewhere between grief and strange new joy, where we are found by the Risen and Living One, where the pieces of our lives unexpectedly come together and spell freedom and release and healing, but where for now we wait, listening to the saving Word.