

Breaking of the Bread

Luke 24:13-35

The morning begins at midday on the road with two sorry disciples who have bet their lives on the wrong savior. They are on a journey of grieving for the man from Galilee, cruelly executed by the Romans with collusion by temple authorities. They are headed back to fishing nets, tax offices, missed appointments, and merciful routine. They are on the road that will return them to what T. S. Eliot simply called the human condition,

"The condition to which some who have gone as far ...

Have succeeded in returning. They may remember the vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,

Maintain themselves by the common routine,

Learn to avoid excessive expectation."

This human condition persists long after the alleluias have subsided.

What difference has the claim of a risen savior made, if death still appears to have dominion?

They ask the question as they are in this conversation along the way, a question from a time and place these two could not yet imagine. "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). The two on the road to Emmaus likely ask the same question of themselves. What are the conversations we have on the way to nowhere in particular when the horizon stretches only as far as the petty pace of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow permits? What should we do when we have reached our wit's end, when what we once thought was worth our lives has left us washed up emotionally, financially, physically, spiritually?

The road to Emmaus is a seven-mile journey, plenty of time to dwell with the hopelessness and helplessness that Christ's disciples then and now know all too well. In this third week after Easter, we are like the disciples who were headed toward Emmaus with no clue about where they are going or what they ought to do. Neither will they recognize the one who has assumed their condition and accompanies them. Part of the challenge is that his disciples did not expect a prolepsis in breaking of the end time, but a resurrection at the "last day." The same may be said of even those of us who faithfully worship. They talked along the way about all these things that have happened as though nothing more than death has happened. They wonder about what to make of the troubles they had seen. They spoke as if fate rather than destiny were their lot. How shall the time be filled by them who sorrow as those who have no hope?

Then, as the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, another character falls into step with them and asks what they were discussing with each other while they walked along. This question stops them in their tracks. When the disciples see the risen Christ, there is familiarity and mystery, recognition and confusion. They sense that he is the one with whom they have shared at table; they recognize that he continues to teach and encourage them even in their vanquished hope. We, 21st century Christian know that the stranger these folk encounter on the road to Emmaus can be none other than the crucified one now in their midst.

They gave a summary of Jesus' mission and the story of his passion. Filled with melancholy the two disciples recounted the events that have changed their world. They described Jesus and his mission as a "prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (v. 19). This was what they had believed from the beginning with the inaugural scene in Jesus' hometown synagogue of Nazareth

where he announces his prophetic mission (4:16-30) and in subsequent scenes where Jesus was acclaimed as a prophet (e.g., 7:16) and expressed his own fierce commitment to healing and exorcism as God's prophet (13:31-35). The Emmaus disciples "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 21), but the death of Jesus had shattered those hopes. They had longed for redemption that broke out like when Zechariah gave thanks to God that the longed-for salvation would be fulfilled (1:68), and the temple prophets Simeon and Anna had been awaiting the moment of Israel's redemption (2:30, 38). To compound the disciples' despair, some of the women in the community have brought back the preposterous news that the tomb was empty and claimed they had a vision of angels announcing that Jesus was alive (vv. 22-24).

Then, without being asked, the stranger tells them a story, tracing God's saving purposes over the events of the last days. We can only imagine all the things that Jesus revealed to them. Jesus gave his own interpretation of his sufferings. The suffering and death of Jesus were to be understood not as an ultimate defeat of God's purpose, but as the necessary pathway to new life. The risen Jesus illumined this for his disciples by appealing to the teaching of "Moses and all the prophets," indeed by drawing on the lesson of "all the scriptures" (v. 27). The pattern of life emerging from death is, in fact, a fundamental pattern of the entire biblical saga. From the original chaos God created life. From the slavery of Egypt came freedom and a homeland. From the destruction of exile came a renewed people. Jesus' interpretation of the Scriptures for the disciples gave them true understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. The risen Christ present within the community enabled them gradually to understand the full meaning of the paschal mystery.

The story reaches its climax with a meal shared with Jesus and the disciples. As evening approaches and Jesus appears to go on his way, the disciples implore him to stay with them. Meals were important in Jesus' ministry. These meals evoke the longed-for gathering of Israel (Isa. 25:6-9) and express the inclusive spirit of Jesus' own mission (Luke 14:7-14, 15-24; 15:25-32; 16:19-31; 19:1-10). Full revelation of who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection meant came at the meal (vv. 31, 35). Jesus' words and gestures were the same as at the feeding of the multitudes (9:16) and reminiscent of the final Passover meal (22:19).

The travelers, after imploring Jesus to stay with them, experience a Christophany. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread. The cherished formula: he *took, blessed, broke, and gave* stirs their awareness of his presence, yet they now know him as the risen Lord, whose own body has been given for them. In a moment of tangible love that embraces the brokenness of betrayal and cross, the rays of Easter's sunrise have illumined the crypt of their entombed hopes. Broken bread nurses our broken faith and can nourish the courage we need to leave our grave clothes behind and vacate the vault of our defeated dreams. The weary travelers feel alive; their hearts are renewed. The witness of the women at the empty tomb is now their testimony too. In the breaking of bread, the beams of resurrection's dawn have reached about seven miles from Jerusalem.

Jesus will meet his beloved "in the breaking of the bread." The hospitality of the traveling companions becomes the doorway to grace. The willingness of the stranger to enter their space suggests trust and hope—and Jesus more than repays their convivial overture. Hospitality expresses deep vulnerability; welcoming a stranger is always risky, and the tables might be turned—for good or ill. It is not readily apparent who the guest really might be. Jesus becomes the host at this

meal, which becomes an expression of thanksgiving and deepened faith. Eucharistic hospitality emulates expansive welcome.

It has been suggested that hospitality is the key to evangelism in our day, so this text offers a window to spiritual practice in postmodernity. Actions more than words, welcome more than self-protection provides the space where others might fearlessly enter and find themselves at home. Sharing the common meal transgresses boundaries and allows communion with Christ, who meets us whenever we gather at the Lord's Table—or at the tables that provide self-giving welcome.

At the conclusion of the story, the risen Jesus vanishes from their sight, and the two disciples leave immediately to return to the community in Jerusalem. There, they learn that the risen Jesus has already appeared to Simon (an appearance Luke does not narrate), and they too give their testimony about their encounter on the road and at the meal. Their burning hearts illumine their blind eyes and quicken their weary souls for a seven-mile nighttime run in the moonlight of Easter. Their sacred city is made holy again, and their pilgrimage of faith has just begun. What they had experienced must be shared. They explain what Jesus shared: that Jesus' death and resurrection are in accord with God's plan of salvation; this was all according to the Scriptures; and they recognized the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread. **Donald Senior** News this good must be shared. News this transforming creates new community. Those illuminated by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ must offer witness to others that they too might come to know him in the breaking of the bread. **Molly T. Marshall and Shannon Michael Pater**

By word and sacrament, Christ opens the eyes of them who rejoice that they have reached their destination in him. Christ's church has been making diligent use of his given means of grace since the evening of the first day of the week, in hopes

that, on the way home, perhaps two in the crowd might even say, one to the other, "Did not our hearts burn this morning as the scriptures were opened to us!"

Cynthia A. Jarvis It is not enough for us to know about Jesus, we must know Jesus, in the breaking of his holy words, in the songs we sing, in the prayers we pray, and in the breaking of the bread.

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