

Where do you go when you are upset? When you feel that everything you valued and everything you trusted is in jeopardy or even lost? Depending on the level of frustration and the depth of our loss, we may retreat into the TV set or launch ourselves into nonstop shopping. We may take a vacation, look for an idyllic retirement community or immerse ourselves in a whirlwind of activity. Such retreats may be therapeutic in the short term, if for no other reason, than they involve our putting one foot in front of the other to get us moving. They may distract us from our pain and loss; and we may desperately need those distractions, those breathers; but by themselves, they are not enough.

Last week Larry spoke of our friend Granvil Kyker and his loss of Mary Agnes, his soul mate, soon after we moved here. Granvil's grief was not short lived. It accompanied him for the rest of his life. But I recall one Wednesday night at dinner his sharing with us a recent venture. As he and Mary Agnes had agreed he would do, he took Mary Agnes' ashes and dispersed them at camping sites they had enjoyed in their time together. Surrounded by those loving memories, he found comfort and a sense of her presence.

I also recall some 30 years ago our church in Louisville being staggered by the murder of one of our deacons at the hands of a disgruntled worker. A long, winding trip along Kentucky back roads finally brought us to the cemetery in the community of his younger years. His widow, looking out on the rural landscape, commented on the number of barns visible from the site that he had helped to construct. Nourished by memories, she found and we found a sense of comfort in leaving him in that place. It was a sense of comfort that I would experience some years later as I buried my father in a cemetery surrounded by rolling pastures with roaming livestock. Remembering the joy he had experienced in just such scenes, I felt a sense of peace even in my loss.

Commenting on this morning's passage, Frederick Buechner describes Emmaus, the nondescript town toward which the disciples head following the death of Jesus, "the place we go in order to escape." "Emmaus," he says,

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 ideals that human beings have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends [*The Magnificent Defeat*, 86].

The disciples, we must remember, were not just burdened by grief. Having experienced the wrenching course of events that had unfolded over the past week, they were haunted not just by Jesus' death, but by the atrocious way in which he died. Undoubtedly, the shouts of the mob rang in their ears. Undoubtedly, the horrors of the cross dominated their every thought. Undoubtedly, any fleeting sleep they managed to gather, was stalked by nightmares. Some 2000 years removed, we fail to register the shock and dismay that must have gripped them. We, in the words of Raymond Blacketer, "expect Jesus to suffer and die on the cross. That is his job. That is what the Savior does" [Raymond Blacketer, "Word and Sacrament," *Calvin Theological Journal* (2003), 325]. There is no dissonance here for us; but for those who knew Jesus and followed him closely, for those who had hoped he was the promised Messiah, it was devastating.

The faces of the two men Jesus encounters on the road to Emmaus, were, Luke says, "drawn with pain." "We *had hoped*," Cleopas tells Jesus, "that he was the one to redeem Israel." Hope is past tense. The dream that had drawn them to follow Jesus has ended; and on this, the first opportunity they could travel in the safety of daylight (Sabbath ended at sundown the previous evening), they have turned their backs on Jerusalem and their dreams. Perhaps they are returning home; perhaps they are simply withdrawing from painful reminders that met them on every corner in the city; perhaps they are fearful of reprisals that might be taken against those who had accompanied Jesus. We don't know.

Whatever the disciples' situation may have been, "their eyes were kept from recognizing [Jesus]." Perhaps in despair, their eyes downcast, they never looked him in the face. Perhaps with their minds racing and their ears ringing with all they had just experienced, they could not detect the familiarity of his voice. We could spend a lot of time trying to sort it all out, and in the process miss the crucial point Luke is seeking to make; for perhaps, more than a retelling of an actual event, Luke is crafting a critical theological statement in story form. Perhaps what we have here is a parable crafted to beam a powerful message to Christ's church of all time. Even if we insist that the story was an actual event that could

have been videotaped, as Marcus Borg would put it, even then we do not want to miss the message it carried and carries today. What is Luke trying to get across to us?

Luke is writing to a generation of Christians removed from the events of Jesus' ministry by 40 or more years. In all likelihood, none of them ever saw Jesus with their own eyes. Yet, Luke wants to say, theirs is more than a secondhand faith. On the road to Emmaus, a small, nondescript town whose actual location remains unknown, two disciples, one unnamed and totally unknown and the other, Cleopas, whose name we never encounter again, come to recognize the risen Christ in his interpretation of scripture ("were not our hearts burning within us . . . while he was opening the scriptures to us?" they later recall) and when he sits at table with them. The words Luke uses to describe Jesus taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread are precisely those with which he has recounted the Last Supper (22:19). Luke, it is true, is writing to say that Jesus is alive; but he is saying more than that. Pointing to the two primary elements of worship in the early church—the interpretation of scriptures and the Eucharist—Luke is writing to affirm Christ's living presence in the here and now. The point is not just that Jesus is alive, but that he is present to and with his people. "Jesus," as Raymond Blacketer puts it, is not merely alive and seated on some distant heavenly throne, but his living presence is experienced by the Christian community in the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacrament"<sup>[327]</sup>.

Jesus is the living Lord we meet in scripture and the very present Lord who is revealed to us in the breaking of bread. "His presence at the table," Fred Craddock insists, "makes all believers first-generation Christians and every meeting place Emmaus" *[Interpretation: Luke, 287]*.

In his little book, *The Crucible of Redemption*, Carlyle Marney recalls a conversation with a friend who reported that the archaeologist Romanoff had uncovered what he believed to be the grave of Jesus behind the rubbish of the third wall but had chosen not to publish his findings for fear of the harm it might do. In characteristic fashion Marney snorted:

Rubbish! Let him publish! Let him publish all he knows! It couldn't hurt. For this is not where he said he would meet us. Not under any wall. . . . He said he would meet us at neither cross nor grave; he said he would meet us at the table"

Living faith, you see, is not about checking off all the right boxes concerning what we believe. Living faith is about immersing our lives in the sustaining presence of the Christ. Coming to an awareness of that the stranger they had encountered on the road and with whom they had sat at table was Jesus, the disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem and shared "how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24:35). It was an experience with which early Christians could identify as weekly they gathered around the table, and it is an experience with which we identify as time after time we gather to rehearse his life and remember his death. "Do this," Jesus said, "in remembrance of me."

In the late 1960's the death of God theology created a furor across our country and within the churches. Robert Otto, Mercer University's very wise and knowing Dean of Chapel, rose to the pulpit to challenge us to move beyond the hysteria. The thing that matters, he told us, is that we should look within our hearts and lives and ask ourselves the question, "Is God alive in and through me?"

And so this morning, I ask you the question: Is Christ alive in and through you? Do you encounter him here at his table? Do you fellowship with him in his people, this gathered body of Christ? And I point you to a hymn that for many years fell out of favor because it did not seem to say enough. Although I affirm that we should leave no stone unturned in our search to know who Jesus was and to learn as much of the actual history of who he was as we can uncover, I also affirm the refrain of that song: "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart." Of that much I am sure. I have encountered him here at the table, here among you and out there in the wideness of God's world among the least of these. Does my life, does your life show it?

As we come now to the table, pray with me the prayer prayed first by those travelers along the Emmaus road and prayed today from the Common Book of Prayer:

Lord Jesus, stay with us; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. Amen. "Collect for the Presence of Christ," *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*, 70.