

“Coming Alive” – Easter 3 - Luke 24:13:35

We have a problem when it comes to stories from the bible. Actually, we have many problems, but the big one I’m thinking of is that we think we know what the bible says, when so very often we have a knowledge that is incomplete at best and dangerously wrong at worst. We have these misunderstandings not from any malevolent or evil source – indeed many of them came from our Sunday School days. But just the same, we have somewhat oversimplified versions of stories from the bible rattling around in our heads.

Take this story of the encounter with Jesus by the two on the road to Emmaus as an example. When you hear the expression “the road to Emmaus” I suspect you’ll give a kind of a knowing nod, because it rings a very familiar bell in our minds. If pushed a bit, I think most people can come up with at least a couple of the key parts of the story. Not too many people, however, remember the smaller details, and we even tend to gloss over them when reading or hearing the story. That’s a bit of a problem, because it’s these unusual details that provide a fascinating link between this story and our own experiences. I call the details unusual, because once we start to dig deeper into this “road to Emmaus” episode we discover some fascinating components that are more like those from one of the old Bob Hope – Bing Crosby “Road to ...” movies than from a typical gospel story.

Of course, you remember the highlights of the story – a couple of guys are trudging along the road to Emmaus, talking about what had happened the past few days in Jerusalem. A stranger joins them (and wink-wink-nudge-nudge we know with ironic excitement that it is Jesus) and asks them, “whazzup?” They tell him what’s happened, and all the exciting things about the ministry of Jesus. Jesus launches into a long bible study and eventually they invite him in to supper. When he blesses and breaks bread in communion with them they recognize him, he disappears, and they babble on.

That’s pretty much the story as we remember it, isn’t it? We know, especially at this time of year when we’ve spent the past several weeks recalling the events leading up to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, trial and execution, we know that this is a resurrection story – a story (unique to Luke’s gospel) about the risen Christ. We even kind of snicker when we hear that Jesus joins them, because we also remember that they didn’t recognize him. Knowing it’s a resurrection story, and knowing how it turns out, we take a kind of childish glee in how they are set up as patsies.

Yes, that’s the story as we remember it. But as I said earlier, there are a number of small details in the story that I believe convey the deep meanings within. The main reason these details make this story so real for me is that they are for the most part terribly unflattering about the two who were part of this “road to ...” saga. The first little detail describes their reaction as Jesus asks them what they were talking about: “They stood still, looking sad.” What a profound little detail to include. It is so personal, so intimate that it instantly draws us sympathetically into the scene. We can relate. We can immediately recall those painful times when we have been remembering and rehashing moments of loss and fresh grief, and how when someone intruded we also stood still, and looked and felt sad. With that tiny detail we are instantly connected with those two, sharing with them both the excitements of the past few days, but also the overwhelming sense of something grand and cosmic and profound having been lost.

We can also relate to the next little, but important detail, that one of them is named Cleopas. This is the only place in scripture that we meet this person, and so have no other ideas about who Cleopas was or what happened to him. But we can easily relate to the sarcasm in Cleopas’ response to Jesus. In pain, we tend to snap out at others, as did Cleopas: “Are you the

only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened?" I suspect many of us have indulged our snappish instincts at one time or another, and most often wish later we hadn't reacted so harshly. Most people, thank God, also understand how those in grief and in pain are a bit short-tempered, and do not take offense. Jesus, also "thank God", is the prime example and model of such tolerant and caring behaviour. Even here, as we see from the tiny detail of his response to the biting sarcasm, he patiently draws forth the best from those two. "What things?", he asks simply, and they pour out a full summary of the events that have overwhelmed and saddened them.

The next small detail that brings home the reality of these two on the "road to ..." was their dismissal of the women's vision of the angels proclaiming that Jesus was alive. To be sure, they acknowledge that "some of those who were with us" actually saw the tomb was empty, but those women must have been fantasizing, or something, because who could believe such a wild story? I mean, angels and things, and alive? I don't think so! How easy it is to see in these two characters real characteristics we recognize in others, and even sometimes in ourselves if we have the courage. How quick we can be to disbelieve and dismiss the experiences of other people, how quickly we marginalize them and move them and their experiences to somewhere on the "outside". It's amazing to hear Jesus' reply to them. Just as the two move from a paralyzing sadness to an arrogant dismissal of the experience of the women of their group, so Jesus moves from a quiet pastoral invitation to a direct challenge. "Oh, how foolish you are!", he chides them. Including such an unflattering challenge to these two spiritual pilgrims, and omitting a sugar-coated hyping of Jesus as a result puts a most powerful stamp of reality upon these events.

Finally, there is that self-congratulatory claim by these two travelers. Congratulating each other, and reassuring each other with the claim, "didn't our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road?" Well, maybe, but it has a bit of the hollow ring of perfect 20/20 vision in hindsight to me. I can't help thinking that Luke was a bit "tongue-in-cheek" as he quoted them. It's kind of common, isn't it, how people are able to re-assess their previous thinking and behaviour in much more flattering terms after some profound insight, isn't it? I think we can all recall with perhaps some embarrassment how we have done the same thing.

All in all, these little, uncomplimentary, unflattering details in the story make these two characters come alive, and emphasise in a powerfully clear way how real the events of this story were, and continue to be. Very real events, happening to very real people just like you and me. That's the power of this affirmation of Jesus, risen victorious over death, approaching and appearing to ordinary people like you and me.

To be sure, Luke tells the story in such a way as to make it clear that Jesus appears not merely to two individuals, but also in such a way as to institute the pattern of response by the church that Luke wishes to endorse many years later. I'm delighted to contend that Luke presents the story emphasising some very Presbyterian characteristics ... the importance of the preached word being based on an analysis and understanding of scripture, and the significance of communion being a powerful component in the revelation of Christ to his people. The appropriate balance of Word and Sacrament is at the heart of the reformed church in general, and I would argue at the very heart of Presbyterianism in particular! But lest we get too proud, and self-congratulatory, we would do well to recognize who these two people are, and where their resurrection experience fits in the scheme of events as we know them from scripture.

Recall that these two were not part of "the inner circle". While apparently part of "the group" that included the women who went to Jesus' tomb they were not part of the eleven.

According to the eleven, Jesus had appeared to Simon, but it was to the two ordinary, weary and sad travelers that Jesus appeared next. These two were not part of the elite, they were ordinary people like you and me, with all of their doubts and faults and shortcomings and short tempers and marginalizing of even their friends; but they were among the very first people to whom the risen Christ appeared, and consoled, and taught, and revealed himself. If Christ would count those two ordinary, imperfect people as being so important that they deserved to see him first, would he not also include ordinary, imperfect people like you and me on his contact list? Of course he would, and does, and will continue to forevermore.

Notice also that these two sad and weary travelers were not blessed with Christ's company because they believed with fervent power, grabbing on to any whisper or rumour that he was alive and seeking to find him, or imploring him to come to them. In their sadness, crushed by what seemed ultimate failure of what they had thought was the ultimate answer, defeated, dismayed, they thought it was all over. In a profound demonstration of just how he reaches out to those who no longer have the power, the will, the desire to seek him, Jesus appeared and walked with and talked with those two discouraged souls, doing whatever needed to be done to open their eyes, to restore their hope, helping them in coming alive with purpose and excitement and dreams and rejoicing.

Now, if reaching out to people who wish to believe in him was so important that it was one of his very first actions in victory over all things, can we not say that same reaching out to people is still so important to Jesus? Of course it is! It is a foundational part of our belief in Christ that he continues to reach out first to touch us who cannot manage to reach out and touch him. With all of the infinite compassion and caring of God, with whom he is one, the risen Christ still finds ways to walk with us, to talk with us, to reveal himself in the word of scripture, to sit with us at his table, to reassure us that we are his, that there is nothing that can break that bond or separate us from the love of God in him.

This is a wondrous story of God's grace in Jesus of Nazareth, risen as the Christ. A story of how two ordinary people came alive when Christ appeared to them and walked with them, and taught them, and blew their minds with recognition in the simple act of breaking bread with them at his table. And bless them, for their response was and continues to be a model for us as well. Yes, they indulged in after-the-fact self-congratulating, but they didn't get stuck there. Within the hour, they moved on, heading back to find the others, and to share the good news, "he is indeed alive!" Two ordinary people, touched by Christ, responding by sharing the news. It should come as no surprise to us, for we are likewise touched, brought alive in our faith, and called to share the good news and proclaim, "he is alive!"