

*The Rhyme of Resurrection*

April 6, 2008

Luke 24:13-35

Whitefish UMC

- † It all started around the conference table on Tuesday as those gathered there to help the United Methodist church in the Western United States nurture new leaders for the future contemplated what appears to be a dismal future. We have been working on this increasingly urgent topic for the last two and a half years, and there are no easy solutions.
- † In fact it will take a miracle for enough effective clergy and lay leaders to emerge by the time most of us who stand before you in pulpits this morning retire in just a few years. As hard as we have worked, the future of the United Methodist Church in the U. S. looks pretty bleak, unless things change dramatically.
- † Conventional wisdom and words felt hollow at that point, and so we turned both to scripture and to poetry for guidance. How fitting, then, that we were meeting in the season of Easter, and the story from Luke's gospel that we read this morning was on our minds.
- † Two people, one named, the other unnamed, were walking along the road for seven miles, from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which took the better part of the day. They are deep in conversation and in grief, for all that they had hoped for and believed in seemed to be gone. They are crushed. They are discouraged. They are confused.
- † They have given up hope, given up trying to save the world. If anything, they are running away or going home in defeat—back to the way things had always been before they met the man who said he was

- the Messiah. What fools they had been, they must have thought, to believe that he was the one who could change the future from one of despair to real promise and liberation.
- † And we could and can relate. Sometimes as much as we want to believe, try to believe in a hopeful future, all rational and conventional evidence tells us we're fools to believe that things will be better.
  - † Whether in our personal lives—especially if we are confronted with debilitating illness or misfortune or loss—or in our collective future—it seems as if the deck is often stacked against us.
  - † And then something happens to remind us, as it did for those two on the road to Emmaus, that God is present and will not abandon us in our discouragement, grief, despair, and loss.
  - † The trouble is, like the companions on the road to Emmaus, we can be lost in our depression and discouragement—so lost that we can't perceive the life preservers thrown to us by even familiar faces. And often that's where we find the grace that is needed to move haltingly, then confidently in to the future.
  - † So my colleagues and I started discussing finding the resurrected Christ in our future. When one mentioned, still depressed, the poetry of W. H. Auden, we all paid attention. Auden, writing just as Hitler's storm clouds and storm troopers filled the horizon in the late 1930's, composed a famous poem called, "In the Time of War."
  - † My colleague, a seminary president, intoned: "And the age ended, and the last deliverer died./In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:/the sudden shadow of a giant's enormous calf/would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside./They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt/a sterile dragon lingered to a natural death."

† Wow. Talk about depressing. But some of us, unwilling to be the last deliverer in Auden’s poem, started quoting from our favorite poets—more hopeful poems! One, the pastor of a thriving church in Denver, offered Robert Frost’s “The Road Less Traveled.” He quoted these two stanzas:

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

† Just last week I learned that Robert Frost had suffered horrible losses all his life—the violent death or severe mental illness of many of his family—and yet somehow he could write this way of another road, another journey that he continued on despite the odds against any future of hope.

† In the scriptures, Jesus joins the travelers on the road, their road less traveled, and he asks them “What’s going on? What are you talking about?” Astonished that he doesn’t know, they ask him the first century equivalent of “Are you crazy, dude? How could you not know what’s going on—it’s on the front page of everything!”

- † But Jesus doesn't lecture them, he just listens to them pour out their hearts about the events of the last few days. Then he talks to them about the scriptures and the fulfillment of prophecy, but they still don't recognize him.
- † It isn't until he says he is going on as they turn off the road to their homes that they come to their senses. They invite him in for supper, and he comes. It isn't until they break bread together, celebrate the first supper together since the resurrection, that they recognize him.
- † Then of course they ask, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us and revealed scripture to us?" Isn't it true that it's only when we look back, often, that we see how God has worked new life in us when we least expected it? Though something was painful, God was able to redeem it and us. And we begin to see the divine pattern for our lives.
- † After returning from Seattle pondering the future fate of the church, I checked my email. There among all the demands and concerns was a daily devotional composition from Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Unfolding Light." The title of the reading, a poem, was simply "Emmaus."

It always happens this way,  
walking along in disappointment,  
rehashing the painful past;

another joins our company,  
unrecognized,  
always unrecognized,

who shares this journey,  
and makes of it  
a gravid present. (I had to look up the word gravid—it means  
pregnant.)

It's never the explanation that changes us,  
even the clearest  
revelation of the landscape.

It's never our eyes that are opened,  
our minds that grasp.  
It's our hearts that burn within us.

Did you think you were alone,  
trudging the question of your journey,  
begging the foreigner for company?

When you invite the stranger,  
give shelter to the wanderer,  
share sustenance with another,

here is a Presence  
that overcomes all distance,  
and vanquishes death itself.

Another heart burns within you.  
There are other hands

that break the bread of your grief.

Your heart knows what your senses cannot:  
the company of One who has loved you  
from the beginning of time.

† Then, as if in confirmation of the essence of this poem, it began to make sense. The future of our lives, the future of the church even, are not dependent on even our best and most effective efforts. They depend on the power of our God who brings life from death even in the darkest, deepest, despair.

† How can we know this resurrection hope? One fellow quoted Francis Thompson's "The Kingdom of God: In No Strange Land:"

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,  
the eagle plunge to find the air—  
That we ask the stars in motion  
If they have a rumor of thee there?

Not where wheeling systems darken,  
And our benumbed conceiving soars!  
The drift of pinions (angel wings, that is), would we harken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

† So, it seems, we don't find resurrection in a perfectly constructed plan for our lives or for our church, but right in front of us. Right in front of us when we practice welcoming the stranger, giving shelter to the wanderer, sharing sustenance with one another. That is, if we pay attention to the poetry of the Emmaus story.

† I like what Wendell Berry rhymes on the subject of resurrection in the last two stanzas of his “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front:”

Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion—put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.

...Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

† Practice resurrection. That's what we are meant to do. In the church and in the world. At home. And know that the risen Jesus will join you in the breaking of the bread.

† For we remember....

Sources:

Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," *Collected Poems of Wendell Berry*.

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Emmaus," *Unfolding Light*.

Craig Kocher, "Practice Resurrection," *Blog of the Christian Century*.

W. H. Auden, "In the Time of War, XII" [www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com)