

Easter 3

Year A

[RCL] Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

Seeing Through Doubt

The walk to Emmaus is a lovely story, filled with nostalgia and pathos, and graced with details. It has attracted great artists because only art can do it some justice. The evangelist Luke was an artist with words, and the painters who were inspired by him have only added to the beauty of the description. Instead of sermonizing on it, it's better to relive the story.

It is early morning, on the first day of the week, after the dawn that was to change the world. Startling revelations have been shaking the disciples who are hiding in a certain home in Jerusalem. Women have been coming and going, some exclaiming that they have seen the Lord, others recounting the words of angels. Their eyes are so filled with light that those who see them almost shun them. John and Peter run to the tomb only to find it empty. All this was witnessed by the two people who start out on the walk to Emmaus and home.

It makes sense to think of them as husband and wife. One of them is named as Cleopas. The other is unnamed, but there is a reference to a woman disciple whose name was Maria Klopas, (in the Greek). Easy to miss a vowel in transcription. Several prominent writers/theologians—among them Bishop George Bell and Dorothy L. Sayers, who wrote in the nineteen-forties—believed that the second person was a woman: Mary Cleopas.

So let's try to imagine the scene. The disciples, disheartened and depressed, had hidden in a home in Jerusalem, after the arrest and murder of their beloved teacher. Because the Zebedee family (James and John) were of a priestly lineage, it is possible that they had a family house in the city, in addition to their place in Galilee. So, we will assume that the women are looking after the mother of Jesus in that particular Jerusalem house, since Jesus, as he was dying on the cross, had entrusted her to his dear friend John. "This is now your mother," he had told his friend.

Several younger women have gone in the dark to the tomb, to wash and anoint the body of the Beloved, only to find the tomb empty. Mary Magdalene stays there but the rest run to tell the disciples

and his mother. Confusion comes in and out of the house during the morning hours. Is it possible? Can we believe what these emotional women are telling us? If it is not true, can our hearts endure another hammer blow? A perfectly human reaction to extraordinary news from ordinary human folk.

Cleopas must have arrived at the house to escort his wife back home to Emmaus now that her task of mercy is done. Confused and heavy-hearted, they start on the trip downhill. Luke tells us that Emmaus was about sixty stadia (10-12 kilometers) from Jerusalem, and though the exact place has not been determined, we will take the writer at his word. It is a cool spring morning with birds singing and sheep moving nearby, but they are feeling sad with only occasional twinges of hope. Mary is telling her husband about the report of the other women, the wild hope that stirred in them, but also of the confusion that followed. Cleopas had talked to some of the men but they had not seen the Lord, so their depression had fallen upon him also. “None of them has seen him,” he repeats.

The sun is rising and they pause, put their bundles down, to drink a bit of water and rest. Afterward, as they bend down to pick up their belongings to continue the walk, someone else appears next to them, and they wonder why they had not heard or seen him before. He says to them, and there is amusement in his voice, “What have you been discussing? I saw you walking and talking earnestly.”

It’s their turn to be astounded. The greatest and saddest event of their lives had occurred in the last three days. How was it possible that there were people left in their world who didn’t know that they had lost the one they loved, the one who had made life worth living? When a beloved person dies, it is difficult to understand how the earth still spins and the sun still rises and life goes on. Their reaction is perfectly natural after such enormous grief. Cleopas asks the stranger: “Where have you been? Are you the only one who hasn’t heard what happened in the past three days? The best of men, a great prophet, one who did nothing but good, was killed. We had hoped he was our liberator.” The stranger is quiet, listening. The wife jumps in. “But something else happened earlier this morning. Friends of ours went to his tomb and found it empty.” She hesitates, both excited and doubtful. “The women saw a vision of angels. And the angels told them—he’s alive.” Her voice moves from excitement to bewilderment.

The stranger doesn’t pause but keeps walking and they follow, mystified. And then they hear his sigh and his words: “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow your hearts are to believe all that the prophets have told you!” Husband and wife look at each other in amazement, but they don’t respond. And now they listen as the stranger tells them stories from their long history and tradition, from the Exodus to

the prophets to their own time. They hear the references to God's anointed and, little by little, they understand that he is talking about their beloved friend and teacher, and now everything falls into place: Jesus' words about himself as he taught them and as he healed so many illnesses; Jesus' continued references to his Father; Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. They understand that all this, even Jesus' death, had been God's plan from the beginning, and now hope fills them that not all is lost. In fact, everything is gained.

But look, time passes so quickly as they are listening to his words! They are almost at their village. They can see the walls of their home. The stranger offers his farewell and makes as if to continue but panic grips the couple. They don't want him to go. The wife, practical and hospitable, says, "Look, sir, it will soon be night. Please, come and stay with us." And the stranger does not refuse. In the manner of Middle Eastern people through the ages, they invite him to eat with them, and he agrees. There is a lamp burning on the table and a loaf of bread next to the water and wine. He reaches for the bread and, confronted by holiness, they watch as he prays, breaks the bread in two pieces and offers it to them. "Ah," they cry out, "it is the Lord!" Recognition now fills them because of the familiar gesture of the Beloved, but now he is gone from their presence. His work is done but they are bereft. How is it that they had not recognized him all those hours he walked with them? They are ashamed. But that doesn't last long. They have seen the Lord. They must share it with the others. Despite their tired legs, they return to Jerusalem.

They go to the same house where earlier they had left their fear-filled friends. But now they are all awake, rejoicing and sharing the good news with one another. "We have seen the Lord!" It becomes the most joyful refrain, whispered in amazement and then proclaimed in loud conviction. "We have seen the Lord!" Cleopas and his wife add to the chorus: "Yes, he was known to us in the breaking of the bread."

May he be known to us also in the breaking of the bread.

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