

Luke 24:13–33 (NRSV)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

To Emmaus, and Back Again

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Luke 24:13–33

The day after death is formal says Fred Buechner. There is a script, a certain set of duties. There are arrangements to be made. People to be called. Hushed conversations to be had. The tasks on the day after death proceed in shadowy monochrome. It is a day of dazed sleep walking. The day after death is a twilight zone.

But the day when tasks are done and everyone leaves is completely different. The day after it's all over, the script is yanked away. The numbness lifts. Raw reality barges in. Inconsolable loss, gnawing regrets, bare loneliness and the disorientation of an unwanted and unmapped future set in.

Cleopas and the other disciple, whose name we don't even know, left Jerusalem that Sunday, the day after there was nothing more to do. Where they were headed we don't know. Of course, Luke tells us that they were headed to Emmaus, about seven miles away. But for centuries believers, Bible scholars and archaeologists have swept a seven-mile radius from Jerusalem, and the arc has delivered no certain candidate for a town called Emmaus. The two of them were just walking, leaving, going down some road, any road, anywhere away from unbearable pain and disappointment. As is the pain in all deaths, the pain they were walking away from was more than death itself. It was months and years of a life they knew, of what had been and now was no more. And let's be honest, they were also escaping their misplaced hopes, their missed opportunities, their wrecked dreams for the future. All deaths shatter dreams, and some deaths, and this one is one of them, shatter the past and the future.

As Cleopas and the other one walked down the road talking to one another, trying to make sense of things that made no sense, a stranger joined them. One imagines the intrusion may have been less than welcome. Wrapped up in a private emotional conversation, they must have resented an outsider joining in. "What are you discussing," says the stranger. They didn't answer right away. Cleopas finally answered with more than a little hostility, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Undaunted, the stranger persisted, "What things?" A simple question. No defensiveness in response to the disciples' unfriendliness. A simple question. The kind of question that sometimes opens the floodgates. "What things?"

And suddenly it all came gushing out. "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

You can hear the disjointed hurt and confusion in their voices. Like an excited child the two disciples jumbled together a breathless response. "The things about Jesus of Nazareth.

Prophet mighty in deed and word. Chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. And some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning. They did not find his body there. They told us that they had angels who said that he was alive. Some others went to the tomb. It was just as the women had said; they did not see him.” They might have added, “And we’re trying to get as far away from this disaster as we can. We loved him, and he’s dead. We thought we knew him, but he was an utter disappointment. We thought he would save us, but he didn’t. Already there are rumors that he’s alive, which of course can’t be right. But the body’s missing, which is awful. The whole thing is a colossal mess. And we have no idea what we are going to do. We just know we need to leave.”

Rock bottom. There is something raw and bitter about hitting rock-bottom. Every plan, every pretense, every expectation goes up in smoke. But sometimes, if we’re fortunate, there in the deepest pit something opens up.

Janice Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” At first her words seem a grim assessment. But I think what she meant was that when there are no attachments, no expectations, no schemes and plans, no manipulations, when all that clutter drops away and one is free from it, it’s possible to see and appreciate things that before were utterly impossible to grasp.

Well, we know how the rest of our story unfolds. Supper time came, the disciples were turning off the road for they had reached their destination, the stranger said good-bye and started to leave, but then the two disciples invited him to join them for dinner.

There is irony here. We know the stranger is the risen Christ, but they do not as yet. The last time they ate together, Jesus had tendered the invitation. This time they invited him. At the last supper Jesus presented them bread as a symbol of his body given for them. He told them that one of them would betray him, which they all denied. And then as if to prove his point, in the solemn moment the disciples immediately launched into a fight about who among them was the greatest. This time there was no fight left in them.

At this point now, when the disciples invited Jesus to dinner, everything had been turned upside down. The disciples were exhausted, and more than that, so had been their insincerity and pride, their bravado and bluster. This dinner was be very different. At this dinner when he broke and blessed the bread and gave it to them, they saw what they had never seen before; they saw who Jesus really was. When they had nothing left to lose, when every edifice they had tried to contrive into being lay scattered at their feet like so many matchsticks, they were free to behold who Jesus truly was. Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of the resurrection. They came to recognize who Jesus truly was and what he was truly saying. And in that moment everything in their lives changed.

The moment of their awakening is poignant and powerful. In *The Journey of the Dawn Treader* C. S. Lewis recounts the story of the boy Eustice who was so hard-hearted that he turned into a dragon. The Christ figure in the story, the lion Aslan, peels away the dragon skin from Eustace. Eustace describes the experience, saying, “And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.” I suspect that the two disciples looking back on this day would say much the same thing, both the hurt and the relief.

Because this moment of the disciples waking up is so dramatic and so important, it may be easy to miss what happened next. Cleopas and the other disciple had earlier begun the journey away from Jerusalem. As we’ve noted, they were going nowhere particular really, just away

from their whole disconcerting experience with Jesus. One imagines that had they not met Jesus on the road, they would have left Emmaus the next morning and continued on their way, continued on their way to nowhere. But the text tells us that after they finished the meal with the risen Christ, immediately, that very night, they reversed course and returned to Jerusalem.

One imagines that with their dragon scales removed and their spirits lifted they returned to Jerusalem with a lighter step than they had when they left it earlier in the day. Where, before, there had been the heaviness of desolation and despair, there was now earnestness and purpose.

This may be the most important moment in the Easter story. The excruciating annihilation of their false hopes had removed their dragon scales and made it possible for them to become true disciples of Jesus. They returned to Jerusalem and gathered together with the others, they gathered together. They walked right back into the place of their greatest defeat and prepared themselves to become what they really could not before now—true disciples of Jesus. We know that the Acts of the Apostles was also written by Luke. Acts of the Apostles is a continuation of Luke's Gospel. After Easter and after Pentecost, which we'll talk more about in a few weeks, Luke's second volume recounts the discipleship of the disciples. It recounts their work in building what would become the church. In many ways the story of Easter is the preparation for this next act in the drama.

Speaking for myself, I am always amazed how durable the illusions of Jesus' first disciples are. They wanted pride of place. They wanted to be on top. They wanted to be winners. They wanted a leader who would deliver all these things and more to them. Instead Jesus gave them what Fred Buechner calls the magnificent defeat. The story never grows old. Every generation of disciples suffers the same expectations, expectations poles apart from what Jesus offers. Every generation of disciples, it seems, must experience the painful dashing of those expectations, the ripping off of the dragon scales. Then, and only then, comes the magnificence of the defeat, recognizing the risen Christ in our midst, recognizing that the way is nearly opposite to what we had imagined. And then, made new, we retrace our steps to Jerusalem, the place of our former anguish, there to love as he loved us. There to renew our journey as disciples of the risen Christ. Amen.