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In Readiness for Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35)

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Easter is over. Some of us have travelled or visited family and friends, some of us stayed home and ate far too much chocolate, and life has, pretty much, returned to how it was.

Wars are still being fought, our earth and oceans and skies are still being overused and polluted, the most vulnerable in our communities are excluded and at risk... Even within us, our bodies still bear injury and disease, our relationships are strained, our minds weary with the concern of it all.

What difference, if anything, did Easter make? This is the question that two disciples ask on the road to Emmaus.

Luke sets the account on the “the same day” that several women had gone to Jesus’ tomb and found it empty. A few verses earlier, the women were told by two terrifying men in dazzling clothes that Jesus had risen, and they had rushed back to tell the Eleven disciples, who remained, we’re told, unconvinced.

Immediately, Luke shifts the scene. “And behold” he starts, in the Greek. Suddenly we’re with two other disciples, not of the Eleven, who have witnessed the events of Jesus’ death, and heard first-hand from the women at the tomb. (Indeed, while one of the disciples is named as Cleopas, some commentaries suggest it’s plausible that his unnamed companion was his wife and one of very same women who had been at the tomb.) At any rate, the pair had certainly been close to the action.

And yet, on the very day the women found the tomb empty, here are two of Jesus’ disciples, doing what? Without even waiting out the day in Jerusalem to see what happens next, they’ve set off, presumably toward home, their feet dragging, their hopes for the great liberating Messiah dashed. Much like the disciples in John’s

account (John 21:1-14) who go back to their fishing boats after Jesus' death, they are returning to what they know. What's the point in hanging around a dangerous place like Jerusalem where you might be associated with Jesus, when the story's already over? And the space that was opened "at early dawn" as the women found the empty tomb has closed down even before the sun has set.

You can hear the reluctance in their voices as a stranger draws beside them and asks what they're talking about. "They stood still, looking sad." You can imagine them studying their dusty sandals, hoping the other would talk first. This was not just any news they were asked to share – their reluctance to answer suggests to me the shame of disappointed hope.

I've often been struck in this story by the fact that "their eyes were kept from recognising" that it was "Jesus himself" who talked with them. I have to admit I allow myself a measure of smugness at this point. You'd *think* the disciples would have recognised someone they'd followed, who'd told them he'd be raised on the third day, and who wasn't in the tomb that morning.

But this is exactly where Cleopas and his companion were at. They were not, on that road, able to see Jesus through the cloud of their own expectations about the Messiah who was *supposed* to save Israel from the Roman occupation. They'd heard of the empty tomb, but they'd failed, entirely, to get the point. All along, they'd wanted Jesus to participate in *their* story, their human pre-occupations. But what was about to happen was going to invert all that.

As Jesus speak to the disciples he re-orientes for them the Messiah's suffering as the glory of his self-giving love, and draws the whole story of Scripture around himself. We're told the disciples feel their "hearts burn" within them. They still haven't grasped that the story is all about the man beside them, but they feel the centre of gravity shifting so that the story begins to revolve around Jesus, rather than themselves. By the time they reach Emmaus, though they still don't recognise Jesus, they urge him to stay. This is the turning point but it is easy to miss. This is the point at which they begin at last to participate in *Jesus'* story.

Now, as Jesus breaks the bread, they are made able to see who he really is. And although he immediately vanishes, the disciples have entered the *inside* of Christ's story. Through a three-fold opening – opening the Scripture, opening their eyes, and opening their understanding – the disciples are at last able to enter into that space that opened with the tomb that morning, and their experience is transformed.

“That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem” – seven long miles back, remember, and in the dark now, with no fear or hesitation and seemingly all the energy in the world – to find the eleven Apostles and share with them what had happened.

It's easy to appreciate why this is such a well-loved passage. It taps our deep desires to move out of disappointment and confusion toward joy, clarity and hope. But if we try to jump too quickly to the end of the story we may miss the nuances of what's really going on.

That's why I love the poem 'The Road to Emmaus' by Christopher Mann¹ – it offers a way to slow down the narrative and hear it afresh.

This poem's imaginative re-telling puts us 'on the ground' and prompts us to consider how we ourselves walk our own road to Emmaus: disappointed, sick of waiting for things to turn around, wary of trusting, concerned with “the price of dates in our panniers” – not seeing Jesus through the cloud of our own preoccupations and expectations.

This account invites us to recognise how, even in our walking away, our 'strategic distancing', the utter, beautiful grace of Jesus comes to us, falls in step with our pace on the road, and begins to engage us with truth.

“Emmaus comes to us, when least expected... it's travelling in readiness for Emmaus that counts,” writes Mann. The Christ-centred life calls us to our full participation, to move, as the disciples in this account did, from 'witness' to 'with-ness'... to more fully give ourselves to God's promise and call. And it seems a way to

¹ <http://www.chrismann.co.za/PDF/The%20Road%20to%20Emmaus.pdf> Accessed 27 April 2019.

begin might be to hold open the space for God to meet us, on our road, by allowing (as Mann so beautifully puts it) those “gaps for love’s irruption/ unbidden, uncalculated into our lives.”

It might seem paradoxical to try to hold ourselves in readiness to encounter Christ, when the initiative for that meeting is God’s – is always God’s. But if we are willing to let go of seeing ourselves as the main actors in the story, to hand over our self-preoccupations and enter Jesus’ story, we can relax into being the receivers, and allow God to be God. And from that stance our readiness looks different, as we live with all that Easter *didn’t* change.

Readiness now can mean our willingness to participate with Jesus in the life of *his* world: to offer hospitality, healing and hope into its brokenness; to be willing to risk and to trust; to let go of our old stories when the new breaks in. We may even find ourselves willing, like Cleopas and his companion, to be turned around and walk in an entirely unexpected direction.