

## The Wisdom of Upside Down

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“Jesus himself stood among them ... [and they] still disbelieved for joy ...”

What an altogether *strange* account is today’s excerpt from the post-resurrection events in Luke’s gospel! Immediately following the narrative about the amazing surprise on the road to Emmaus, Jesus again appears, this time amidst the remaining 11 of the original 12 apostles, together with “those who were with them”. But, despite the two lucky ones on the Emmaus road recounting with – albeit wondering – certainty that it was indeed their crucified saviour who had walked with them, here we have the assembled company still ‘disbelieving’. It can’t be really him, can it? This is too good to be true!

There is an awful lot of doubt in this final chapter of the gospel! Indeed, it almost seems to be one of the key takeaways the gospel writer wants us to note: that, left to ourselves as ‘ordinary disciples’, we are unable to trust beyond the merely physical for evidence of God’s faithfulness.

Let’s go backwards prior to today’s reading to see this in the narrative. At the beginning of the chapter, we have the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and “the other women with them”. The evidence provided to the 11 and those who were with them is – unsurprisingly in the light of Sarah’s angle in her Easter reflections – seen as “an idle tale” by the men, and they ignore it.

Then we have the story of the risen Jesus appearing to the two travellers on the road to Emmaus. The men tell Jesus of all that has been happening, including the women’s testimony regarding the empty tomb event, but they are none the wiser as to the identity of their companion. Jesus even has to chide them for their lack of

trust in the prophets, telling them that the outcome could not have been different given the nature of the ancient prophecies.

The men only finally understand that evening at supper when their companion blesses bread, gives it to them and then vanishes. Only then do they turn to one another with recognition: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road ...?” Excitedly, they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others, and their story is immediately and extraordinarily confirmed by the next appearance of the risen Christ.

At first, Jesus tries to gently reassure them, giving them the proof of the marks on his hands and feet, but their chief reactions remain ones of consternation and fear. He asks them to touch him, but presumably no one takes up the offer. You can almost imagine his raising his eyes to heaven as if wondering how he’s going to get them on the same page as him. So comes this delightful action of eating a piece of broiled fish. The fish, it seems, is finally the proof of the pudding!

It is delightful that something so utterly mundane is what wins over the doubters, but it seems to me that there is more in this than merely a quirky detail. It is not that Jesus proves he is able to engage in the normal human process of digestion that is the point of his divinity. The page he has got the disciples on to is only a literalism page, a necessary precursor to going deeper. It’s a device: a kind of stepping-stone for the ordinary human mind to use so that we may go further and read between the lines, grasping the deeper meanings.

The question is, of course, what are these deeper meanings? Well, the way Luke tells it, it seems that we are being urged to inhabit a frame of reference that is entirely new and unexpected in looking at the post-crucifixion events. And, if we choose to adopt such a frame, it has transformative implications for us in how we live our lives from the moment we assent to it.

This message is there in a negative sense in the telling of the Emmaus road story. It is so interesting that the disciples don’t understand it is Jesus by a kind of divine judgment: “their eyes *were kept* from recognising him”, Luke says, and we can

take it to mean that for some reason of God's own, they are being kept in the dark. Why? Because, it seems, they have not yet put on that new frame of reference that changes everything. Instead, they are stuck in the old narrative: that all their hopes of a saved Jerusalem under the mighty prophet Jesus are dashed – even despite the wild tales of the women and the alternative possibilities that may portend. Consumed by sadness and the story they were spinning themselves, they tell their unknown companion that they “had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

But their (relatively) small story is not enough given the scale of what has happened in the resurrection of Christ. According to that up-and-coming theologian Sarah Bachelard, Luke's text is grappling for a sense to describe the unprecedented – that something new is being communicated<sup>1</sup>. The boundaries between such polarities as life and death, what is spiritual and what material, are being questioned. As Rowan Williams has said, the disciples' mindset on the road to Emmaus is strictly local, but Jesus' reappearance is able to free them (and us) “from our projections and expectations”.<sup>2</sup>

Luke communicates this by differentiating between knowing based on our mere material senses – eyes, ears, touch – and the knowing of the heart. The key moment of recognition for the disciples on the road is when Jesus breaks bread and blesses them in the divine gift, but Luke doesn't have them ascribe this recognition to what their eyes see in his doing this. Just as their eyes ‘were kept’ from recognising him earlier, so they are actively opened by God again *only when* they recall the burning in their hearts that occurred when Jesus took them beyond their strictly limited view of what has recently happened.

As Cynthia Bourgeault has said<sup>3</sup>, the conviction in their hearts does not come about only because they are blown away by his appearing to them after death. While of course that event is not insignificant, the reality of their hearts' truth is not about that. Instead, it is about recalling the nature of what Jesus inspired in them while he

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, 22 March 2021

<sup>2</sup> R. Williams, *Resurrection* (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2002) p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> C. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus* (Shambala, 2008)

was physically with them. As they recall all that he said, signified and meant, and gave them hope in being, they are taken over with the conviction that everything is utterly transformed.

It is helpful for us, millennia later, that Jesus' followers went through all this first. Like them, most of us probably doubt, going first through all the possible gloomy explanations before we are prepared to tentatively embrace something more unexpected and more glorious. Still, even if we manage to get to this point of upside down thinking, what do we now do with this amazing story? Even if we take the leap, encouraged by the insistence of the risen Christ that something unprecedented has actually occurred, how does this materially change us?

Well, of course, these are huge questions. But luckily for me, many have wandered into this kind of territory before, so with their help we may be able to point towards some fruitful ways of being in the light of the Easter messages.

My first text is the insight of a musician, Steve Hogarth, who has written about the benefits of seeing the world from an unexpected perspective. In the lyrics to the Marillion song 'Go!' he exhorts his listener to 'Turn your life upside down/Be anyone you want to be.' 'It only takes a fraction of a second,' he sings, 'to turn your life upside down,' but the result is that we are 'safe and sound, off the ground' and 'wide awake on the edge of the world'. It's all metaphorical, of course, but it's pointing to the same territory: we can move from the already known and assumed, from all-too-human and circumscribed fear-based living, towards an unknown but bounteous way of being. It's the language of being blessed and open to receiving that blessing.

My second text is more familiar: Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poem 'God's Grandeur'. Let's hear it again in the light of Luke's Gospel:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

We don't have to indulge in complicated textual analysis to discern the essential meaning in this poem: that through over-familiar manipulation of God's creation, we have overlaid the sacred and ever-renewing wondrous beauty with our mundane and fruitless busyness. Fortunately, it is not we who are in charge though – it is the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit renews creation daily with her bright wings. The 'ah!' here is like the recognition of the disciples as they recall their hearts burning within them. It is the sudden understanding in the heart of what is always there but is obscured by our unwillingness to trust beyond ourselves.

Rowan Williams has referred to the Resurrection as playing havoc with the human "egocentric fantasy" that we are in control. He looks at the operating system that the disciples had running in their minds prior to Jesus' death as one that had to fail because it was what he calls a "barrier to actual change". He urges each of us to adopt an attitude of "alertness and receptivity", opening our eyes to the truth that "will transform and liberate".<sup>4</sup>

This liberation can take many forms, and they probably only become clear in the living out of the transformed vision. Helpfully, this means that we do not have to

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<sup>4</sup> R. Williams, op. cit., p. 77.

decide before the event how we have to live and what we have to do. It is more a case of trusting what will come. On this basis, turning your life upside down is not about what we do but about what we assent to be done to us. Perhaps we are on the right track if we find ourselves disoriented – away from what is familiar, from what we all-too-easily assume, and from that which is based on self-indulgence?

If such is true then just as the disciples were forced to go way beyond what they had imagined of Jesus, maybe the invitation of our biblical text today is towards proceeding in the light of the *unassumed* and the unfamiliar. Maybe it is an invitation to inhabit a space of humility and leave ourselves open to transformation and open to Grace, safe and sound on the tentative edge of the world? Living in this post-crucifixion light means we operate with an active acknowledgement of the reality of wounding and the necessary existence of compassion for our self and others. It also allows us to acknowledge our hearts' truth of the post-Resurrection conviction that the reality of Love is bigger and more active than we could ever imagine being procured through our own actions alone.