

## Two on the Road to Emmaus



Luke 24:35 “. . . Then (the two disciples) told (the eleven and their companions) what had happened on the road, and how (Jesus) had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

This is the third of a seven-part sermon series that I am preaching all this Easter Season entitled “The Witnesses to the Resurrection,” a rare chance to review all of these biblical stories in a single year. Last week, we looked at familiar narrative of the Doubting Thomas and the uniquely explicit presence in that story of Jesus’ wounds and scars. Two weeks ago, we examined the tale of the women at the sepulcher, who kept their distance and ended up running away scarred and confused, saying nothing to anyone at all at first, about what they had found there. Today we look at the well-known Resurrection story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but I want to get at this

story from a slightly indirect approach. So, bear with me if you will.

My own mother's death will always be associated in my mind with my ordination. For forty-two years ago, I walked down the same church aisle for my ordination, that only a week before I had walked down to bury my mother. For I had returned home to be ordained following my graduation from seminary, and before moving to Beacon Hill in Boston for my first call. And so by chance, the night before my mother died I sat at her bedside and went over the ordination service with her, and admired the dress that my father had bought for her for the occasion, and reassured her that if she needed, there was a wheelchair and oxygen available at the back of the church. She died quietly the next morning at home in her bed.

It became my practice after my ordination that whenever I celebrated the Eucharist to remember my mother in my prayers, to name her and bring her to mind within the service. And I vividly recall the occasion several weeks after my ordination when I named her name in the prayers at some weekday Eucharist, but was suddenly unable to bring to mind the likeness of her face, was suddenly unable to recall any real image of her in my mind at all. I remember stumbling through the remainder of the service in a mental panic trying to remember the outline my mother's features, trying to picture her in my mind. I felt as though she had suddenly died again, a more terrible death than the first, because

now I could not at will recall the living memories of her which I had and which I cherished. I understand now that this is a common phenomenon that happens to all the bereaved, that moment when the deceased beloved one drifts out of our active consciousness and cannot necessarily be remembered on command. I ran home that night and rummaged through my papers and drawers and found a simple black and white photograph of my mother, and with its help, I was able to recapture the contour of her face and the tenderness in her eyes; I was able to fill the mental void again. Photographs of my mother became more important to me after that, and I keep that one on my dresser still.

A few months later, on a cold, grey, dark wintry evening in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I sat in the choir stalls of the Cowley Fathers' monastery for their weekly neighborhood service, and as I did so, I perchance glanced up into the gallery among the sparse evening crowd and was struck that night by the familiarity of a certain figure in the shadows. For a moment, my heart jumped while I strained to make out the face, for the form and movement of the individual I spied reminded me of my dead mother. Though my reason clearly told me otherwise, I could not dispel from my heart's longings that it might not really just be my mother, for I couldn't see the face clearly, and with God all things are possible. Again and again I glanced up there during the service, for the unreasonable hope lingered within and haunted me.

Afterwards I came up excitedly behind the figure in the courtyard and when she turned around my mother vanished, for a stranger then stood before me. Although my reason was then satisfied, my heart sank deep within me, as my mother's absence was unexpectedly more keenly felt than before.

So I can well imagine, therefore, the complexity of emotions of those two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Their beloved master had been suddenly taken from them, and had tortured and crucified only days before. Their hopes and expectations for the future were crushed. Fear and confusion had overcome those who had fled and forsook the master. And now some women of their group astounded them with a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive. I can well imagine how their hearts burned within them as they talked with the stranger about all these things on the road as they walked, so much so that they would not let the stranger go on as the evening approached, but invited him to stay with them that night. And how when he was at table with them, he took the bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were suddenly opened, and they recognized him for a moment before he vanished out of sight. And how they in their excitement got up and rushed the seven miles all the way back to Jerusalem to find the others and to tell them the news.

Many of those liberal scholars who reject in principle *any* literal interpretation of the Resurrection, point to this story in

their defense, because it is so enigmatic, because Jesus is at first not recognized, then mysteriously he is, and then just as mysteriously he disappears. One minute he is there and the next he is gone. One can well imagine that of all the Resurrection appearances, this one may well have been only a figment of their imagination, a subjective vision influenced by their excited state of mind and their intense love for Jesus. But for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, it was very real indeed. And while this episode may not have the factual weight of the other Resurrection appearances, this story is, I think, often the most comforting to later Christians; for it is the one Resurrection appearance with which we can perhaps most easily identify.

Unlike those earliest witnesses, we will never have a chance to see the Resurrected Jesus on earth. Unlike Thomas, we cannot demand the kind of proof he did, to see the print of the nails in his hands or to put our own hand on the wound in his side. For the Risen Jesus is not wandering around the hills of Galilee anymore. And thus his Presence, if it is to become real to us at all, must become Real to us in some other way.

For us then, Jesus' presence is often made real in unexpected ways, in the breaking of the bread at the Eucharist perhaps, or in the loving act of some friend, or the kindness of a stranger. As with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, this is where Jesus will become known to us, in the activity of others. And he will be

more real there sometimes, then in the remembered stories of him that we read as lessons week after week every Easter season.

In a similar way, I so often now see the image of my deceased mother in my eldest daughter, Clare, in the touch of her hand, or the look on her face, or the movement of her form. In her, my mother is often more alive than any photograph, more real than any figure in the shadows. Thus I can well image how the doing of such a simple thing as breaking bread at the table could recall so vividly their Master's presence to those disciples on the road to Emmaus, and again how quickly it could vanish and the moment pass. I know how excited they must have been, and I understand why they rushed all the way back to Jerusalem to be with the others who had followed the master.

We too, like the first disciples, yearn for the living presence of God in our lives, just as I still long to see my mother again. But we are sometimes too preoccupied, too suspicious, and too busy to actually recognize God's presence around us. In our objective world of fact and truth and matter and money, the church's world of mystery and meaning and risk and relationship often seems misguided, if not silly. And like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus we are always more eager to discuss and debate the *idea* of God and to hear the stories and listen to the Scriptures, than to observe what God's activity

around us. And so we are oftentimes unprepared to experience or recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst.

For there is in all our personal relationships with those whom we love that awful fear of forgetting, of losing touch with something that was so precious to us, and of being reminded then of that loss. O how we have all longed to recall the image of the forgotten face of those lost loved ones, to see our mother or brother or child again, and cannot. And in the case of Jesus it is a face that we have never seen, but one we all know well. We too have at times felt our hearts burn within us as stories of the Beloved one are told. We too have at times known Jesus' real presence unexpectedly in the breaking of the bread and in the loving acts of friends and strangers.

Jesus himself, I think, foresaw the dilemma of his disciples in that common human pain of forgetting, and so on that last night at table with his friends did deliberately encourage them not to forget, but to remember him. "Do these things in remembrance of me," he said at their last supper. And so we do, we break bread together with one another, again and again.

And how often I have longed to cry out in the midst of that activity; "O Lord, we have not forgotten you, you are still remembered and loved, you are still so often alive in the touch of our hands, the look of our eyes, the actions we take. No, Lord you are not forgotten. We remember you regularly in the simple things

of life, in the breaking of bread, the birth of our children, the prayers of our sick, and the burying of our dead. And your presence there is a comfort to us, and fills us with hope, and a burning within our hearts. For you do indeed live on, in and among us." Alleluia. Christ is not forgotten, but is alive. AMEN.