

Two on the Road to Emmaus



Luke 24:35 " . . . Then (the two) told (all the other disciples) what had happened on the road, and how (Jesus) had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

I may have told this story before, and if so, I apologize for the repetition, but I think of it each time I hear the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It reminds me how my mother's death has always been associated in my mind with my ordination. For as it happened, I graduated from Virginia Seminary and returned to my native Texas to be ordained, before assuming my first position at a church in Boston. And by chance, the night before she died, I sat at my mother's bedside and went over the order of service with her. I admired the dress that my father had bought her for the occasion, and reassured her that if needed, there was a wheelchair and oxygen available at the back of the church. The next morning, my father yelled up the stairs for me to get up, as he often did, only this time the tone of his voice was different. I recognized it

instinctively and rushed downstairs to find that my mother had collapsed. My father had called 911 and was performing CPR, and told me to go outside and wait for the ambulance, which I did, where seconds lasted for minutes in my anxiety. My mother was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital. And so it was that I walked down the same church aisle for my ordination, that only a week before I had walked down to bury my mother.

It became my practice, therefore, 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 picture the likeness of her face, suddenly unable to recall any image of her at all in my mind. I stumbled through the remainder of the service in a kind of mental panic trying to remember the outline of my mother's features, trying to picture her again. 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. It is a common phenomenon that I now understand happens to all the bereaved, that moment when the deceased drift 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 still photograph of my mother, and with its help, I was able to recapture the contour of her face, the tenderness in her eyes, the curl of her hair; 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 weeks later, on a cold, grey, dark wintry evening in Cambridge, I sat in the choir stalls of the Cowley Fathers' monastery for their weekly neighborhood service, and as I did so, I perchance glanced over 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 couldn't dispel from my heart's longings that it might 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 over there during the service, for the unreasonable hope lingered within me and haunted me. Afterwards I came up behind the figure in the courtyard at coffee hour and when she turned around, my mother vanished, for a stranger then stood before me. And although my reason was now 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 in this morning's Gospel. Their beloved master had been suddenly taken from them, and tortured and crucified before their very eyes only days before. Their hopes and expectations for the future were dashed. Fear and confusion had overcome those who had fled and forsook the master, and now hid behind closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities. 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 that stranger talked with them about all these things as they walked along the road, such 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 all the way back to Jerusalem to find the others and tell them the news.

Many modern 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 story with which we can perhaps most easily identify.

Unlike those earliest witnesses, we will never have a chance to see the Risen Jesus. He has ascended. 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 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 made real in unexpected and familiar things, like 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, than in the remembered stories of him that we call to mind week after week in these services.

In a similar way I so often now see the image of my deceased mother in my eldest daughter, in the touch of her hand, or the look on her face, or the movement of her body. In her, my mother is often more alive than in any photograph, more real than any figure in the shadows. Thus, I can well image how the doing of so simple a thing as breaking bread could recall so vividly their Master's presence to those disciples on the road to Emmaus, and again how quickly the moment could vanish, and pass. I know how excited they must have been, and 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

often more eager to discuss and debate the idea of God and to hear the stories and listen to the Scriptures, than to observe God's very activity around us. And so, we are oftentimes unprepared to experience or recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst.

And as 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 that forgotten face, and at times, cannot. And in the case of Jesus, it is a face that we have never seen, but one we all know. We too have at times felt our hearts burn within us. We too have at times known his real presence in the breaking of bread and in the loving acts of friends and strangers.

And 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. And so, we do, we break bread together with one another, again and again and again, and recall stories of him in the Gospel and in our own lives.

And how often I have longed to cry out in the midst of this activity; "O Lord, we have not forgotten, 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, the love that we share. No, Lord you are not forgotten. We remember you regularly in the simple things of life, in the breaking of bread, and 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 it 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.**