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Giving Witness Luke 24:48

In the 24th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, two of Jesus' disciples are on a journey both physically and metaphorically. It's the end of a long day, at the end of an even longer week. On this day, they have heard rumors that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, that he was raised from the dead. But they have seen no sign of this resurrection, and certainly there are other more logical explanations for a missing body. What they did see three days before was their friend and teacher mercilessly nailed to a cross. What they had is now gone and they know they will never again be able to sit at table the way they had with their friend. Their lives will never be the same again. And so perhaps to clear their mind or escape from it all a little, they leave Jerusalem and set out for a seven mile walk to a town called Emmaus. With the setting sun at their backs they walk on contemplating what they have experienced over the last week and I imagine wondering what they believe about it all. They are numb and introspective and not really paying attention to the world around them.

We know this road. It is the road you take after a funeral as you return home and face unopened mail and blinking messages. It is the road you take when a plan is failed, a dream deferred, and a hope is lost. It is the road you take when you know where you have been, and you are not at all sure where you are going. We know this road. A long walk helps when you're not sure where you are going. It gives you time to unclutter your mind and relive the hard and joyous moments of the past. This two hour walk to Emmaus gave the disciples time to sketch Jesus' face in their minds and remember every word he said. It provided space for them to file away and talk about their memories.

Suddenly, they realize that someone was walking with them. In the midst of their grief they had no idea how long this stranger had been there, and he catches them off guard when he asks them what they are talking about. Surprised by the man's lack of knowledge on Jerusalem's current events, they see this stranger as the chance to let their story pour out of them. People who lose their loved ones need more than anything to keep them alive by telling stories about them, by keeping them alive through memory, and so it is for the disciples as they let one story after another be told about Jesus of Nazareth. They tell him the events of the last few days: their hopes that he was the one, his death, the rumor that he was alive, and the clutter and confusion of the present.

And then an usual thing happens, this unknown companion responds to their story by referring to scripture. He puts what just happened in the big picture and he helps them remember what the meaning of Jesus' life and death is all about. It's interesting that in dealing with grief and loss the stranger uses foundational beliefs to begin the healing process. The disciples are comforted by him and they invite the stranger to stay for dinner. At table he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and suddenly they remember: "their eyes open and they recognized him."

In their disbelief, they rationalize that he must be a ghost and Jesus responds, "Let me show you. Look at my hands and at my feet." A ghost doesn't have hands and feet, flesh and bones, and he

says, “See that I am here.” Jesus wanted those who loved him to get the immediate reality of new life, but not even flesh and bones could convince them. Luke writes that “In their joy, they were still disbelieving,” so Jesus moves on to another strategy. Jesus asked, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They give him a piece of broiled fish, and he eats it in their presence. It is his hope that in his breaking of the bread and in needing food, they will see that he is indeed alive. He was there all along, and they didn’t know it. Grief does that. It ties us down in our own selves to the point that we cannot see that we never journey alone. Fear does that. Fear of the unknown paralyzes us into becoming static.

Why are we afraid sometimes? If we trust in God, if we believe that “all things work for good for those who love the Lord,” why are we ever afraid? But we are, and I am too. Why do we doubt? Why is it one day we can gather in this sanctuary and sing the Hallelujah Chorus with all our hearts and then a few days later, it all seems like a fairy tale, the promise of life after death, the assurance that love is the strongest force in the universe?

Madeline L’Engle is a lifelong Christian and a writer. She once wrote: “Sometimes I just know that I am going to come down with an attack of atheism again. It’s like the flu. Spiritual flu, I call it. I get ready to endure three or four days of doubts and deep distance from God. Then through the grace of God, I find myself spiritually well again” (Glimpses of Grace, p. 47).

This story reminded me of an experience I had in college. I was part of group of a students that did work to educate students on AIDS and HIV, at a time when there were many misnomers and fear around the disease. As part of our research we journeyed to another campus to have dinner with students with HIV and AIDS. As we ate together these strangers became friends and their stories became our stories. At the end of our dinner, one of the students I came with made the point that the most important thing about this time together was that we were at table with one another, that we broke bread together, and through that we came to understand ourselves and each other in a way that we never had before. That experience opened our minds to a deeper understanding of a subject we had only studied. Seeing someone face to face and sharing a meal with them, broadened our understanding and inspired us to educate others on their behalf. And that is what Jesus does for his grieving disciples. That is what the Emmaus story is all about.

At last, Luke tells us, “He opened their minds,” to understand the scriptures of old and how they had applied to him, to his suffering and death and resurrection. And now that their minds are opened, he gives them a charge saying the message he has brought about repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations and they are the ones to do it. He says, “You shall be my witnesses. I am entrusting the entire endeavor to you.” That surely was the most astonishing thing he had said to them all day. They must have thought, Who—us? The doubters, the fearful, those who have very limited credentials? You are going to leave this all in our hands? Indeed he was.

These are the people that Jesus relied on to start the Christian church. Our faith is founded upon the experiences of ordinary people who had doubts, fears and closed minds. Preacher Peter Gomes writes “Easter does not come to the philosophically wise or to the intellectually sophisticated or even to the morally perfect, nor does it come to the politically powerful and the wielders of influence and ambition. It comes in the first instance, this new life of Easter to ordinary and perplexed people much like ourselves, who despite all of our efforts to cover our fears and our anxieties and to hide our ignorance, when confronted with questions of faith we are really ultimately fearful, anxious and ignorant” (Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, P. 87).

I believe that for those of us who are grieving. For those who are the most lost, the most wounded and most afraid; for those are the most closed minded that there is an unnoticed companion silently walking beside them waiting to be noticed. And then one day they will decide to sit at table with someone and share their despair with a friend, not knowing who that friend really is. Until days or even years later when they reflect back on that hard, hard, time and like a flicker of light, they will suddenly realize that Christ was in their midst -- that that person was a witness of the living Christ. That person was not obnoxious or judgmental, they simply walked beside them, reminded them of who they were, and sat at table with them with only love and understanding.

Frederick Buechner wrote that. "The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears reveal only. . . a gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself." (The Magnificent Defeat, p.87-88)

I believe that those of us who are not grieving and not lost, we ordinary people with fears and doubts, are called to witness, to be the one walking silently next to our journeying friend, until they are ready to talk. We are called to use scripture to remind people that they are ultimately children of God. We are called to be ready to break bread without finding judgment or disappointment in them. Paul Tillich once said that the saint is a saint not because he is good, but because he is transparent for something that is more than himself. That is who you are. You are called to be one who is more than your own capabilities, a means of grace, and a place where the Holy Spirit can make its dwelling. That is who you are. That is who God has made you to be.

I pray that on your Emmaus journeys you always know Christ's presence as you walk that lonesome road, and I pray that you see, and taste and touch the presence of the living Christ so that you may in turn respond by going out and journeying with someone else down that same road, so that they too may recognize the living Christ in you. God Bless you. Amen.