

Easter 3A

The Road to Emmaus May 4, 2014

It is remarkable that when the writers of the four Gospels come to the most important part of the story they have to tell, they tell it in whispers. It is the resurrection. The Jesus who was dead is not dead anymore. He is risen. He is here. According to the Gospels there was no choir of angels to proclaim it. There was no sudden explosion of light in the sky. Not a single soul was around to see it happen. When Mary Magdalene arrive at the tomb afterward, she thought at first that it must be a gardener standing there in the shadows, and when she saw who it really was and tried to embrace him, he told her not to, as if for fear that once she had him in her arms she would never let him go, the way I suspect that if you and I were ever to have him in our arms, we would never let him go either. When the disciples heard he was alive again, they tended to dismiss it as too good to be true, and even when they finally saw him for themselves, Thomas still wasn't convinced until Jesus let him touch his wounds with his own hands.

The way the Gospel writers tell it, in other words, Jesus came back from death not in a blaze of glory, but more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, then in that place. If they had been making the whole thing up for the purpose of converting the world, presumably they would have described it more the way the book of Revelation describes how he will come back again at the end of time with the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure and his eyes like a flame of fire, and on his head many diadems. (Rev. 19: 14, 12) But that is not the way the Gospels tell it. They are not trying to describe it as convincingly as they can. They are trying to describe it as truthfully as they can. It was the most extraordinary thing they believed had ever happened, and yet they tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious, and holy, and fragile, and unbelievable, and true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonor it.

Down through the centuries the Christian church has not whispered it but shouted it, and who can blame it? It was St. Paul who was blunt enough to come straight out and write to the Corinthians: “If Christ has not been raised from the dead, when our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” (1 Cor. 15:14). So when churches all over the world proclaim that he has been raised indeed, they naturally do so at the top of their lungs and with all flags flying. But all the wonderful things that are going on around us on Easter Sunday can sometimes make us more conscious than usual that nothing even close to all that wonderful is going on inside ourselves.

That is why the Sundays after Easter are so precious, and precious because, in their comparatively subdued, low-key way, they seem not only closer to how the resurrection actually took place as the Gospels describe it, but, more important still, closer to the reality of the resurrection as you and I are apt to experience it. These everyday Sundays without all the extra flowers and music are like the kind of day that Luke describes in his account of the two disciples on their walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus some seven miles away.

They had heard the women’s report about finding the tomb of Jesus empty that morning, but as Luke writes, it “seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” They did not believe the women because they found what the women said unbelievable, and then as they trudged along with the evening approaching and the sun starting to set, Jesus himself—risen from the dead and alive again—joined them on their way, only they did not know it was Jesus because as Luke puts it, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him,” and I think those eyes are almost the most haunting part of the whole haunting story because they remind me so much of my own eyes and because I suspect that may remind you also of yours.

I believe that although the two disciples did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them, that he saw them as if they were the only two people in the world. And I believe that the reason why the resurrection is more than just an extraordinary event that took place some two thousand years ago and then

was over and done with is that, even as I speak these words and you listen to them, he also sees each of us like that. In this dark world where you and I see so little because of our unrecognizing eyes, he, whose eye is on the sparrow, sees each one of us. Whether we recognize him or not, or believe in him or not, or even know his name, again and again he comes and walks a little way with us along whatever road we're following. And I believe that through something that happens to us, or something we see, or somebody we know, he offers us, the way he did at Emmaus, the bread of life, offers us a new hope, a new vision of light that the dark cannot overcome.

That is the word that on Easter Sunday is sounded forth on silver trumpets. And when Easter is past and the silver trumpets have faded away to hardly more than a distant echo, that is the word that is whispered to us, the saving and holy word. *Amen.*