

April 23, 2023
“A Haunting Place”
Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19 / Luke 24:13-35
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I have long loved this story from Luke, this tale of the resurrected one, of Holy Presence, travelling with two disciples who are fleeing Jerusalem, wrapped in grief. I've loved how the Holy Presence travels incognito, unrecognized by them, though they have been disciples, and how Holy Presence companions them, converses with them, listens to them in their grief.

“We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they wail, as they share with this stranger the pain in their hearts. I've loved how, when they finally reach their village, the two extend hospitality to the stranger, welcoming Holy Presence though they do not know it, and how in the simplest, the most ordinary and routine of things—breaking bread together—how in that their eyes are opened, they recognize the Presence for who it is, and the hope that was past tense stirs to life again and stirs them to life, enough to return to Jerusalem, enough to return to the others, enough to return to the life they had been fleeing. THAT, no less than what happened to Jesus, THAT is resurrection, life restored, which is why I have long loved this tale.

And I suspect, among other things, it invites us to consider our lives in its light. When has Holy Presence companioned us, you? When has it listened to, shared, our pain or grief? When has it restored us? When has it stirred the hope that was in past tense, the joy or love in past tense, when has it stirred them into life again?

And when have the ordinary, familiar things of your days become windows through which you recognized Holy Presence, recognized how sacred is life, your life? When has a meal shared with loved ones or a comfortable silence been more than a routine, but rather a sacrament through which Holy Presence

shone? Or the faces you recognize on the trolley or train, those you don't know but travel toward work with regularly, when have they become more than a familiar commuting community but rather a blessed touch of home, holy home? When has the spring air caressed you or beloved arms held you or a deep breath reminded you of just how good, how holy it is to be alive? When have you glimpsed the Holy Companion sharing your days?

And in whom or in what has Holy Presence come hidden to you? What guise has Holy Presence worn—a friend sitting with you in your grief; a neighbor whose need calls you out of your self-absorption; a cat curling up beside you or a dog leaping with excitement to greet you, both wrapping you in unconditional love; a blooming tulip or frolicking squirrel or trilling bird reminding you of life and beauty so much larger than you? In what guise has the Holy Companion walked with you, sharing your days, whether you recognized it or not?

I have long loved this tale of risen presence incognito, of Holy Presence sharing life though unrecognized. I have long loved this tale and its invitation to consider our lives in its light, but what struck me as I read it this time is that it is more than a tale of life put back together again, more than a tale locating us in a world filled with the sacred and inviting us to see, more than a tale asking us to recognize the Holy as it comes to us in love shared, hope shared, beauty shared, in all that gives and blesses life. This is a tale of more than that, which you can recognize if you ask not when or who or what, but where.

Where? "... two of them were going to a village called Emmaus ...", the tale starts, to Emmaus. Do you know it? Of course, you've not been there; it's not there anymore. But the thing of it is, it wasn't there then, not when Luke's Gospel told this tale and not years before in the days of Jesus. It wasn't there. It had been leveled in the year 4 BCE, burnt to the ground by Rome, which crucified thousands in the area and carted even more off into slavery. Herod the Great had just died, that brutal but very efficient king who ruled Palestine on behalf of

Rome. He died, and many saw his death as the opportunity to rise up, to push back against this Roman weight, maybe to push back hard enough to shake it off. But Rome didn't take kindly to such sentiments and squashed such stirrings with incredibly brutal efficiency, making examples of places that dared such resistance ... like Emmaus.

It was gone, a no-place, left intentionally as a no-place in order to remind folks of what happens if you dare hope for justice—you will fall, you will fail, you will be overwhelmed, as was Emmaus, the now no-place of no-hope, a charred spot on the landscape, a scar on the memory and spirit, the haunting reminder of just how brutal the world can be and just how futile is resistance. That's Emmaus ...

You may recognize it, such a haunting scar. It is the slave castles of Ghana; it is Auschwitz; it is Hiroshima; it is the killing fields of Cambodia. It is the place we all have gone sometimes, far too many times—when the police brutalize and kill yet another person of color; when there is another gun death, a school shooting, a mass killing and nothing, nothing, changes; when we are faced with what we are doing to our planet, with the short time left to change and the virtual inactivity of a leadership too busy pointing fingers at each other to do anything; when we recognize the unrelenting persistence of poverty and its devastations amid soaring corporate profits and wealth inequality.

That's Emmaus, and it's in that haunting place, that Luke proclaims resurrection. It is there, in the midst of no hope, that Luke pictures hope reborn. It is there, where all is lost, that Luke envisions life re-found, reenergized, empowered anew for the work of hope and healing and justice.

That's Emmaus, and it is a haunting place, one that haunts every regime, every structure, every relationship that relies on threats and intimidation and force to maintain itself rather than simple justice and mutuality, one that haunts them all

with a reminder of how toothless is their power. No, this tale of resurrection *there* says—no to the victory of death over life, of submission over hope; no to the authority of power and injustice; no to fear and the quiet ending of hope envisioned by intimidation. No, says resurrection in Emmaus, says the power of life rising there.

They may have witnessed that in a small town near where I live in Lancaster. The public park in that town is managed by a board that oversees its upkeep and uses, but it is owned by a church. Last year a local coalition held an LGBTQ Pride Day at the park and expected to do the same this year. They were approved by the park board; they paid their down payment, only to be told later that the trustees of the church had overridden the board's decision and denied the permit in a statement with some flimsy excuses and some clearly othering language.

The LGBTQ community was devastated, but then came the outcry—from churches, from allies in the community, from the LGBTQ community itself, from affirming members within that congregation. Then came the outcry, so great that the board of trustees not only reversed their decision but also apologized—apologized to the community at large, apologized to the LGBTQ community itself with the pledge to continue to working with them to become more open, more affirming, more loving. From devastation rose new life—that's resurrection, in Emmaus.

They may have witnessed it in Tennessee. As you no doubt know, a vote of the state legislature stripped two black lawmakers of their legislative seats for joining others in protest of that very legislature's doing nothing in response to the mass shooting in a Nashville school that took the lives of three children and three adults. In statements reminiscent of those made by church leaders and rebutted by Martin Luther King 60 years ago in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, legislators criticized those two black colleagues for rude behavior, for disrupting order, for

violating decorum and due process, and then they voted to expel them. Just before the vote—on Maundy Thursday, no less—Justin Pearson, one of the two, addressed the legislature and, among other things, said this:

Resurrection is a promise, and it is a prophecy. It's a prophecy that came out of the cotton fields. It's a prophecy that came out of the lynching tree. It's a prophecy that lives on in each and every one of us in order to make Tennessee the place that it ought to be, and so I've still got hope because I know we are still here and we will never quit!

In the face of intimidation, resolve, hope-filled resolve. That's resurrection, in Emmaus.

I am sure they witnessed it in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid. Jim Wallis tells of a time Bishop Desmond Tutu was preaching during an ecumenical service at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, when the South African Security Police stormed into the cathedral and lined the walls, with notepads and tape recorders out to keep account of what was said, clearly with the intention to intimidate.

Tutu, who had just weeks before been arrested and jailed for days with other church leaders to show them what happened to opponents of the South African regime, paused and looked at the security forces, and then he said, "You are powerful, very powerful, but I serve a God who cannot be mocked!" Then Tutu broke into a grin and said to them, so boldly, "Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side," and it was like the New Year's clock had just struck 12 and the congregation, just before outnumbered and terrified by the security forces, suddenly leapt to their feet, shouting praises to God and dancing, dancing, dancing down the aisles and out the doors where more police and military forces were waiting and didn't know what to do with them, so just stepped back and let them through, dancing right through them and down the street, dancing for freedom in South

Africa. From paralysis and fear rose boldness and dancing and the triumph of hope. That's resurrection, in Emmaus ...

Which is a haunting place, haunting with possibility where all seems lost; haunting with energy in the face of all that seems numbing; haunting with joyous hope where deadly power seems to prevail. No, says Emmaus to injustice and the powers of death, you don't win!

Emmaus—it's a haunting place, haunting with resurrection, haunting with the promise of justice, haunting with hope that will not quit. Emmaus. May it haunt us! May it claim us! May we be its signs! Ha-ha! May we be its signs!

And let's rise and sing together of what we discover in Emmaus, that God still goes down that road with us. "When The Poor Ones."