

Old Testament Lesson—Jeremiah 20:7-9

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Such a Luke thing to do...It's such a Luke thing to tell a story like this—an Easter story about the risen Christ appearing to a couple folks no one's ever heard of, returning to a town no one's ever heard of...

...having an experience altogether unheard of.

"Are you the only person around who hasn't heard?" the two disciples ask their new traveling companion.

How can this guy not know what's going on? Seriously? You'd have to be living behind a rock! Right?—sealed airtight behind a giant stone or something...

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Their grief is still fresh, mind you. Just a few days prior, their beloved friend and teacher was publicly executed. And by all accounts, it was brutal. Many would argue this was cruelty for cruelty's sake.

And to top it all off, as if their hearts weren't already broken enough, there were all these rumors swirling around the area—hurtful rumors that seemed to make the grief worse—compounding their anguish—like pouring salt into an open wound.

Honestly now—how could this guy not know? It was all anyone was talking about—a triple crucifixion smack dab in the middle of the Passover festival—a bloody spectacle you couldn't look away from no matter how much you wanted to...no matter how much you tried...

"What things?" Pshh, give me a break, buddy.

You see...I imagine what made these rumors so painful for Cleopas and the other disciple was that the rumors dared to create hope where hope just wasn't possible. These were the kind of whispers you'd be afraid to say out loud—a "maybe" so delicate—a reality so fragile that to even verbalize it just might make it evaporate—as if to simply entertain the possibility would be to expose its absurdity.

Can you imagine wrestling with those rumors—gossip too good to be true—grapevine buzz you want to believe with every fiber of your being—except that every rational thought you're able to have says otherwise—says not so fast.

There's no way he could actually be alive, could there? I mean it's totally understandable how the grief, the disappointment, how the trauma of it all could play games with a person's mind and judgment. Right? I mean, we get it. We get it.

We desperately want to hold on to any semblance of hope in the worst of times—especially when all we see is death and dark valleys—even if that hope feels like sand we're holding in a basket filled with holes.

Who knows: Maybe the sand will somehow clot—will harden just enough to plug those holes and stop falling like rain. Right? It could happen. Couldn't it?

You see: Whenever we read Scripture, we rightly do our best to put ourselves in the sandals of those in the story. We try to imagine and empathize with those we read about.

And, in this case, if I'm Cleopas, I'm trying really hard to give our friends at the tomb this morning the benefit of the doubt. Those women aren't liars and I've never known them to be unstable in any way.

But...*alive again*? Being greeted by angels? I mean, come on. If I'm Cleopas, I know something of the profoundly visceral mourning they must be experiencing. I know something about that overwhelming grief that blocks out everything else.

That being said, I can understand seeing what you want to see. I can understand believing what you so desperately want to believe. But no matter how deep that desperation is, it doesn't make it real. It doesn't make it true. Right?

This is exactly why Cleopas and the other disciple with him sent a few trusted friends to the tomb. They needed to confirm these extraordinary claims. Before setting out toward Emmaus, they sent these folks to the source of the rumors; but Luke tells us, *"they did not see him."*

They did not see him. They didn't see Jesus—alive or dead for that matter.

They saw no evidence that would back up the women's story. No angels anywhere nearby. No miraculous breadcrumbs to track. And of course, an empty tomb doesn't exactly verify the resurrection of the person laid to rest inside it.

The way I see it...Cleopas and his friend are on the road to Emmaus—on the way home, presumably—because there was no reason for them to stay in Jerusalem. Whispers of Jesus' resurrection from the dead were nothing more than that—whispers—far-fetched dreams of what could never really be the case.

As much as they wanted to believe otherwise, Jesus was dead. As for the absence of a body, well...it wouldn't be the first time an expensive tomb was raided and robbed...just more grief on top of a fresh layer of mourning. When it rains, it pours...

And let's be real, okay. Even though they could remember their friend and teacher doing lots of miraculous things, including (yes) raising the dead, it's another matter altogether to bring yourself back to life.

If only they could *will* the rumors into reality. If only they could make it true by believing it with enough conviction.

Let's face it: No one comes back from a death like that. Why would they let themselves believe something so outrageous? After all: Hearts already shattered can't afford to break any more.

And let's not forget (by the way): the very road they're traveling—the towns within reach—Jerusalem, Emmaus—still very much occupied by the Empire—still under the boot of Roman oppression.

Their beloved Master's crucifixion was yet more proof that a restored Kingdom of David was just a fantasy. Israel wouldn't rise again any time soon.

Frankly, it was a miracle in itself they weren't questioned about their loyalties when they slipped out the Jerusalem gates. Everyone knows Cleopas couldn't lie to save his life. Thank God the Roman soldier on patrol was too busy roughing up that poor merchant.

Again, if I'm Cleopas or his friend, I'm thinking, Give me just one reason to hope the worst isn't yet to come. Give me just one reason not to despair. Show me a single shred of evidence to keep hope alive. I'm begging you. Please...

I'm surprised the two disciples didn't absolutely lose it when this stranger starts criticizing them for their lack of faith and understanding! Remember what this guy said?

Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

Excuse me? Foolish? Clearly, he's not trying to make any friends. And after we kindly let him walk alongside us! Man's got some nerve; that's for sure. But he's not done!

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?

Okay, okay. That's it. Now this guy's gone too far. Who does he think he is? We were traveling with Jesus for months! We were listening to him, learning from him, eating with him. We've never seen this guy among Jesus' disciples. Not once! What does he know? Cleopas, let's give this guy a piece of our mind! He's got in coming.

It's at this point (I imagine) that things took an unexpected turn. We know this from what Luke tells us a few verses later. At this point, the strange traveler takes on a particular role: a scholar and a rabbi.

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

How extraordinary—almost miraculous. For the next several hours of journeying together, engaged in a walking and talking Bible study, something felt different. For the first time in days, their grief and pain wasn't the end all-be-all of their every waking moment.

For the first time in days, something else was occupying their thoughts. Something else was touching their hearts. Not that their grief was gone, but it seemed to be displaced—dislodged so that something else could enter in—so that something else could take center.

Here's how Luke later describes what's happening inside them:

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Repeat)

Siblings in Christ, I don't need to convince you that this world is full of things that break our hearts. You know the injustices that abound. You know the inequities that divide, the traumas that are inflicted, the cruelties imposed on the most vulnerable.

And perhaps you've even felt that same burning within your hearts. I'm willing to bet you have. Sometimes it feels like warm compassion. Sometimes it feels like a scorching, righteous anger—the kind of holy rage God's prophets often put out into the world: *If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

You may've felt your heart burning when George Floyd was murdered. Perhaps you felt it as Gaza was being destroyed or when ICE took innocent lives. Maybe something sparked within you when the civil rights of the trans community were scrapped. Or maybe you've been ignited by the greed of tyrants that knows no limit.

But here's the good news, friends: That fire you feel isn't placed there by accident. It comes from Christ walking alongside each one of us, even if we don't realize it in the moment. It comes from the Word of God inscribed on your heart and mine.

As an Easter people, I ask you: What sets your heart on fire? What inspires that prophetic piece of your soul? What animates you to act?

And once you've discovered what that is, follow your heart. I guarantee you'll encounter the risen Christ along the way. I guarantee you'll find opportunities to minister in Jesus' name.

You won't solve all the world's problems. But in terms of going where God wants you to go, I can confidently say this: You're getting warmer.

Amen.