

**“Undercover Jesus”**  
**The Third Sunday of Easter – 4.26.2020 – Luke 24:13-35/A**

There is a famous tale about the power of stories that Elie Wiesel often told:

*When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, and the misfortune averted.*

*Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.” And again, the miracle would be accomplished.*

*Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.*

*Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient. Because of this story, Wiesel concluded God made humans because God loves stories.*

To really be able to mine the gold in the four Gospels, it helps to understand that each Gospel tells the story of Jesus in a way that is individually crafted by the storyteller – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Then, it helps to employ everything you know about hearing or reading good stories from different authors. Once we get beyond simply gathering information, we can hear what the author, inspired by God, might be wanting us to hear, for the Bible was never intended to be about the information contained within, but the invitation to enter into a relationship with the characters – some human, and some divine.

Imagine - if you will – today’s story of The Road to Emmaus - as told by Mark Twain. Would he tell it as an adventure with an unfamiliar companion, a la *Huckleberry Finn*? How would Truman Capote tell it – would he choose a framework like *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* or would he focus on those who utilize the violence of crucifixion as *In Cold Blood*? How about Steven Spielberg and George Lucas exploring the earthly life of an extra-terrestrial living among us? Each Gospel writer has a favorite lens – a theme used to serve up the story, interpreted for their particular community.

The Gospel story today is told only by Luke – and it has the power of metaphor working for it. For Luke wrote this Gospel almost 40 years *after* the events happened, so he must have had a particular reason for telling this story - that no other Gospel writer shares – to his hearers. The two travelers are not just two grieving disciples who have lost their leader, their rabbi, their friend. They were not just leaving the funeral, sadly making their way back from whence they had come. No! Before they left the other disciples, they had heard the report of Jesus’ Resurrection – but apparently it didn’t sound like good news to them at the time. Why did they leave? Was Passover ruined for them?! Nothing more to see here?! Were they afraid? Stuck? Were they so confused that they were willing to abandon their little community and go back -- *to what?!*

Emmaus. Home. Now Emmaus is thought to be the site of a Roman military garrison, an outpost of the worldly power that crucified their Lord. And yet, they were used to being

surrounded by that military presence – at least they could travel the road home in safety. But the last week had been too much. The story had come to a terrible end. And even with a glimmer of hope, they went home. And then, God came to them, on the road – a fellow traveler. (Have you ever met someone new - and were having a perfectly normal conversation with them - when somehow it turned on you and they started spouting Scripture? Kind of unnerving...) But this is Jesus, listening to them telling their story – including their hopes and dreams that had just been dashed – and then seizing on a “God moment” to help them understand just what they are experiencing – even as it is happening! They are running away from the best thing that ever happened to them because they do not understand, and they are just about to “see the light” as it is turned on by the Light of the World. Jesus opened the scriptures to them; and maybe he also opened them to the scriptures.

Finally, they reach Emmaus and the end of their “Master Class.” In their invitation for Jesus to stay with them you can hear that they want so much more – they have begun to see what the story means, and they just can’t get enough of it! Then at supper, they share living bread that has been broken *for them*. *Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*. The moment of recognition leads to a clarity they had not known earlier on this Day of Resurrection. So they returned the 7 miles to Jerusalem that very night, and found their companions in the faith community from which they had been walking away. They shared their stories; the 11 tell of the Lord’s appearance to Simon Peter (one we do not have access to) and they a special conversation they had despaired of ever having again. Their stories filled the place with the light of their shared story and the new life they were all receiving, beginning this very night.

If ever there was a time to spend more time with God – especially through the stories held lovingly in the cradle of our Holy Bible – it is now. The metaphor that the Road to Emmaus story employs involved all the disciples’ scattering - out of fear, confusion or anxiety - “leaving” the protection of the Shepherd’s flock when the wolves come out – and we all can identify with that. As old ways and old times crumble day by day, we may feel abandoned and alone. Our first and deepest gut reaction is simply to run away when things begin to overwhelm us. If we are honest with our human selves, when we receive Bad News – we just want to go home.

Peter went home from the empty tomb (at the end of Luke); in John’s gospel, both he and the Beloved Disciple went home (after seeing the grave clothes that had bound their Lord); Matthew and Mark’s women who brought spices and saw angels went home; and these two faithful disciples were also headed that way. We finish college without a job, and we go home. We reconnect with family, by going home. A global pandemic threatens life as we have known it – and we go home. This is not a punishment (that we have all experienced, I’m sure. The one that starts out “Go to your room!” and is not pleasant.) Home – for most of us – has always been a sanctuary – a place apart – a place of safety and security against the outside world and its troubles... Even Jesus went home to his Father, to prepare a place for us.

But when we receive Good News, it is natural for us to want to break out –to shout for joy and run all the way back to Jerusalem – (And, btw – the news is not yet good enough for us to break out and start meeting in person YET – but God willing we will – when it is safe and the time is right.) Problem is, sometimes we confuse Good News and Bad News, and therein lies the human condition – depending on/leaning on our own understanding,

our own intuitions – and forgetting to rest in the Lord. Forgetting that Jesus Our Shepherd, will always come after his lost sheep.

In the end, the news was not of our making. It was not what we could imagine, or even what we would have hoped for. In our wildest dreams we would never recognize the companion on the road was an “undercover Jesus.” But in him, God came down - to us – as an infant in Bethlehem born unto us, out of the waters of Baptism to be a minister to us, transfigured on the mountain to reveal God’s glory to us, and finally as a Savior to die for us. Easter celebrates the truth that God came down to gather up Jesus - and us - into THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD.

This past week on PBS News Hour there was a story about the dramatic effect of Covid 19 on the Navajo Nation, and other native nations in our country. The virus is taking many of their elders – and even beyond the fear of losing their loved ones, is the fear of losing their culture, their heritage, even their identity when the elders pass. For with each death, parts of their story passes away as well.

It is more important now than ever to spread the Gospel of God’s love for us. It is more important – not just because of the virus, but because too many emerging adults were raised in a time when we surrendered a great gift to others- the gift of teaching our young ones about who we are and whose we are. And now, they are out there all alone – without the story – or with versions of it that you would not recognize if they should articulate it. Let me share a tiny piece of the dialog from a new play by Kyle Hatley:

I think this is a story about  
     being among the living while we are living.  
 Finding people whose tree we can carve our name on,  
     and who will carve their names onto ours.  
 What else do you need?  
     Except more time, maybe.  
 But maybe  
     time running out is our gift –  
     makes all of this worth what happened.  
 That’s why you write stories.

We have learning to do, my friends. We have teaching to do - just as Jesus did on the road, strolling along with two of his disciples who really didn’t know that they were about to be “re-claimed” by him. That they were about to get a glimpse of the glory they’d been hoping for – the glory they’d been following – the glory of a God who comes down to us. What other God has done that? Who has a story like we have? That God so loved the world...that’s **you**. That’s me. God did what he did – through Jesus – because of love. Not because we deserve it or earned it or have ever done anything at all to be so loved.

But it’s true. And you know it. Because you have come home once or twice before. And you know the story. Right about now, folks could use that Good News. And you know what? Your version of that gospel truth is the best way to tell it. So, open our eyes and our lips, dear Lord. And stay with us, always. Amen.

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**Resources: Joseph A. Edelhert in 4.23.20 *Sightings*; Brian Hjortdahl for 4.21.20 *ELCA Faith Lens*; *Frankenstein: A Ghost Story*, by Kyle Hatley, KC Rep New Works 2020.**