

The Love that Knows No End
Luke 24:1-39

“While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Love, according to friend and theologian Robert Jenson, “is not so much the name of a personality trait, as shorthand for a narrative: death and resurrection.” That narrative is before us this morning, telling us of the love come near and going with us as we try to make sense of all these things that have happened.

Perhaps we would do well to establish the things in this narrative—in this shorthand for love—that did happen. Jesus was crucified, died and was buried. We know because there were witnesses: women had followed Jesus from Galilee. On Friday afternoon, they stood at a distance watching as Joseph of Arimathea took his body down from the cross, wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock hewn tomb. “They saw the tomb,” Luke says, “and how his body was laid.” I think almost everyone in this sanctuary can, without a doubt, follow the story to this point. Most might even add two details to the things that happened, in the enlightened way we know what we know: the stone was inexplicably rolled away and the body was missing. These last two things only compounded the real thing that had happened: a friend, a teacher, the son of a mother was dead.

Let me pause to assure you of one thing before you stop listening to the story because its claims are unreasonable: the characters in this narrative are trying to make sense of the same things you and I are trying to make sense of this morning. One way or another, those things come down to one thing: they are trying to make sense of endings, of losses, of death. They are trying to get their heads around death’s reality and hold their broken hearts together in the face of its finality. Some of them likely did not sleep a wink last night because they could not stop thinking about the future that had been foreclosed, the promises come to an end, the hopes dashed, the trust shaken, the fear now stalking them because they simply did not know what they were going to do in the face of death.

I dare say, before the sun sets tonight, every one of us, old enough to contemplate our own end, will rehearse a narrative or two, consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to find meaning in all these things that have happened: things as far away as Brussels, things as near as the inconsolable grief of your own child. Most of the time the stories we tell ourselves to tame our outrage or drown our sorrows are so insipid or shallow, so banal and belittling of the enormity of our grief, that they only compound the senselessness of death.

Of the women’s response to the things that had happened, Luke uses a Greek word translated as “perplexed.” I think the word would be better rendered “at a loss.” The women were at a loss: they knew nothing in and of themselves that would help them make sense of the things that had happened, things that now included an empty tomb. They had no word, no story, no reason they could tell themselves. I hasten to add that sometimes being at a loss is the only honest place to be.

While they were at a loss, Luke says, two men enter the story and stand beside them. The clue that the men are about to say a word the women cannot say to themselves is that they are dressed in dazzling clothes. If you know the whole story, you know that this is not the first time dazzling characters have appeared out of nowhere. Later in the story these men will be called angels. They are messengers of God and the women are terrified. “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” they ask. “He is not here [obviously], but has risen [not so obviously].” If you count yourself among the reasonably enlightened here today, this is where you begin to think about whether the relatives will be on time for dinner or which teams will be in the final four by the end of the night.

Yet this is the point in the story, every Easter morning, that I beg you to suspend disbelief for a few minutes more and see where this narrative about love, this story about death and resurrection, takes you. “Remember,” the men say next: remember how he told you he would die and be raised. The women did remember and, apparently, remembering was enough for them to go on. Jesus said he would rise. The tomb is empty. It must be true. I confess that this is not enough for me, nor is it for the disciples. Wishful thinking. An idle tale according to the eleven. At most, Peter is astonished by the empty tomb when he arrives.

So ends the appointed reading for Easter. It is where Mark’s Gospel left us last year, except in Mark the women run from the tomb and say nothing to anyone, because they are afraid. I am not afraid, but I am here to tell you that an empty tomb *is* an idle tale unless Jesus is alive. Moreover, unless he is alive not as a remembered and revered dead man, not as a resuscitated corpse, not a ghostly spirit, but recognizably as himself except with death forever behind him, I have nothing to proclaim. Then the narrative before us this morning is about death and, as the lead Op Ed in today’s New York Times declares, “Je suis sick of it.”

But if he is alive, how will we know? Luke’s story means to give us a clue. I think we will know he is alive only as he surprises us. Only the living, Robert Jenson reminds me, can surprise us. A dead person cannot. Because surprise constitutes his aliveness, we cannot reason our way to the resurrection or fit the resurrection in to our settled ways of knowing what we know.

To wit, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple (a place-holder for you and me) are walking and talking with each other about all these things that had happened, just as we will talk, when we leave the sanctuary, about all the things that have happened—the terrorists still on the loose in Europe, the idiocy of the presidential race, parents more frail than we can bear, the ominous lump that portends we know not what, the empty chair at the table, global warming, an incoherent sermon—and we will do our best to fit these things into our own family narrative or national narrative or religious narrative about what it means to be alive and human and going somewhere.

Then imagine a stranger coming alongside of you, asking after the things that have happened, listening as you tick off the births, the deaths, the victories, the tragedies, fitting them in the story about how the future is not turning out as you thought it would. The hopes you had pinned on a parent, a child, a spouse, a family, a degree, a job, a leader, a nation, a political movement, a god have all been dashed by the “brute enigma of an ending,” dashed by death’s crushing dominion. Moreover, time is not healing your wounds as someone told you it would. The church’s idle tale of an empty tomb and a risen Lord? Not working for you either. Every love you have ever dared has ended in death.

The stranger’s response is to tell the disciples the same story they had heard all their lives long, beginning with Moses and the prophets. Only now the ending, the final word is not death but love. In fact, the final word is the one telling the story. Therefore, every promise the story makes, every hint of hope hidden in its plot, every report of light overcoming darkness is vouchsafed to them in him who was dead and is alive. “When death is the final thing,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his unfinished *Ethics*, “earthly life is everything or nothing. . . . When it is recognized, however, that the power of death has been shattered, when the light of the miracle of the resurrection and the new life shines into the depths of the world of death, we do not demand of life any eternities, but take from life [only] what life has to offer.”

You get the feeling in Luke that the two disciples appreciate the stranger’s effort and even are moved by it, but not changed. I imagine the same is true for most of us. Only when the stranger joins them for supper, takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them—only when they sit down to the supper that has been celebrated by the members of Christ’s living body for the last two thousand years—do they get that the stranger is Jesus, who was dead and is alive. He has surprised them as only a living person can. For a split second in time, in the breaking of bread, the love that is stronger than death grasps them and propels them to run and tell the eleven who will run and tell the world.

To the world, the difference in those who believe is insignificant, but to any here who have been surprised by his living presence in a most ordinary moment or in extremis, everything is changed. Because he lives, we grieve, but we do not grieve as others who have no hope; because he lives, we find ourselves by losing ourselves on what seems for all the world to be a lost cause, knowing nothing will be lost if death has no dominion; because he lives, we are fearless in the face of death-dealing powers or fear-mongering politicians, love having trumped death long ago. All of this, let me add, is a leap, an astonished wager on flimsy evidence, a matter of faith!

“Near the end of the course,” poet Carl Dennis begins, “in that part of the hour

Reserved for questions, a silence fell on the class
When the girl who’d been quiet all semester
Raised her hand to ask if anyone there besides her
Believed in heaven. An embarrassed silence
While each of us wondered why she hadn’t chosen
To go to the Bible college just a mile away.
Or if not heaven, she added after a moment,
Did any of us believe the unlucky were granted
A second life on earth, under stars more friendly?
If not, what did we tell ourselves
When facing the fact of unequal portions?
How did we deal with the students in the flat above,
Who died in the fire that somehow missed us,
With the family crushed by the truck
That failed to stop at the corner we’d just passed
A moment before? And what about those
Whose particular stories are lost
In a shared disaster, inhabitants of a town
Flattened by a tsunami or buried in a mudslide
Or torched by a warlord eager to prove
That the ruthless can always defeat the peaceable?
What truth did we lean on, she wondered,
That might steady her too if her faith
Should happen to stumble? Then she was done,
Leaving us with a silence that had no trouble
Stretching to fill the hour and lingering
As we pulled our coats on and ventured out
To see if our luck would hold all day.

How do we make sense of the things that have happened? Suspend disbelief. Harbor the wild expectation that you will be surprised because Christ lives: “He is risen! He is risen indeed!”