

Fear, Joy, Disbelief, Wonder, and a Piece of Broiled Fish
Luke 24:36-48
Easter 3

Psalm 4

¹Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

²*How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?*

³But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.

⁴When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

⁵Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

⁶There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!”

⁷You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.

⁸I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Luke 24:13-15, 28-48

¹³Two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him....

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But 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.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

³²They 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?”

³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem.

And they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

³⁴They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”

³⁵Then [the two] told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

⁴¹While in their joy

they were disbelieving
and still wondering,
he said to them,

“Have you anything here to eat?”

⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them,

“Thus it is written,
that the Messiah is to suffer
and to rise from the dead on the third day,
⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins
is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.

⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.”

Prayer

O beloved savior,
Why is it sometimes so hard to recognize you?

You came to us in pathetic, unsavory circumstances:
you were not wealthy;
you were transient;
you did not come from a learned or distinguished family.
Your people lived in an occupied land,

born into occupation;
 the occupying force found them threatening
 and worked to subdue them,
 even as the mighty, conquering Romans
 benefited economically
 from the exploitation of your beleaguered people.

Why is it so hard to recognize you?

At Christmastime we fawn over you:
 born in squalid circumstances,
 surrounded by stench and animal filth,
 having been carried by a teenage mother—
 with surely some whispers of immoral, irresponsible behavior
 on her part, and some unknown man's.

In Holy Week we weep over you:
 mocked and brutalized,
 treated unmercifully, unjustly,
 in a manner that was *arguably* legal,
 but was most *certainly* Satanic in its unjust inhumanity.

At Easter we rejoice over you:
 triumphant in the victory of your return,
 but still disfigured grotesquely, abominably:
 your body ripped by metal,
 emaciated from thirst, violated by spearpoint.

In Ordinary Time, we take for granted that you are, generally,
 on our side,
 since we ourselves, if not examined too closely,
 judge ourselves to be, more or less,
 the image of—and the standard of—
 what is good, right and true.

Why wouldn't you love, protect and exalt us, Lord?

We're so wonderful,
and even our blemishes simply highlight the fact
that we are only human.
How divine we feel we are in our simple humility.

So it is only natural, O God,
that when we encounter people with your profile
and find that it is so different from our profile,
we not only fail to recognize you,
but, indeed, often seek to expel you.

We pray for poor people,
immigrant people,
transient people,
undocumented people,
people living under occupation;
we pray for mothers and fathers
who can barely keep their heads above water;

We pray for those who are abused,
victims of violence,
people who are bullied,
people who are scared and vulnerable,
victimized by the law of the land
when that law recklessly tears decent families apart
and punishes people for trying to do right
by their families and their adopted country.

We pray for those who do not look or live
like us, or like people of racial or economic privilege,
and whose lives are impacted by that reality daily,
in a thousand little ways
that we people of privilege almost never pick up on.

Why on earth is it so hard for us to recognize you?

The baffled and disheartened disciples on the road to Emmaus
were deliberately kept from recognizing you,
but still they invited the stranger in.

Is it possible that our occasional deliberate decisions
not to let people we classify as strangers in
are what hinder us from being able to recognize you?

Forgive us, mighty God,
when we do not see you
in the vulnerable, poor, transient people around us;
And restore both our vision to see what we are doing in this world
and the perception to imagine what we can do, and need to do,
to make it more like the world you created it to be.

We pray in the name of our risen Lord,
who has so much to teach us,
if only we will listen for his clear message
amid the clutter of our mystified minds.

Amen.

The Sermon

Do you remember a time in your life when you were so overwhelmed
that you felt you were having something like what they call an “out of
body” experience, but in an particularly positive way?

Has there been a time when you felt you had your breath taken away,

when you have been
stopped in your tracks,
gobsmacked,
exalted,

exhilarated,
at a total loss for words?

or felt like your heart could almost burst
with love,
or joy,
or pride in someone you loved,
or gratitude to God?

or when you've stood or sat or lain there
in stunned silence,
slack-jawed awe,
utter amazement,
breathtaking fascination,
or bafflement at how *something* or *someone* or some realization
could be so shatteringly beautiful?

The two disciples who had been walking on the road to Emmaus later
marveled that

while the man who turned out to have been the risen Christ
simultaneously walked with them on the road
and walked them through the whole story of the People of God,
interpreting the things about himself in all the scriptures,

their hearts were burning within them—
one of the most poetic statements in all the Gospels.

Have you ever felt that way?

What's the happiest you've ever been?

Daniel Ladinsky has done what I assume is a rough translation of a
poem by the 13th century mystical poet Rumi, who said:

“I want that kind of grace from God

that when it hits
I won't get off the floor for days.

And when I finally do
stagger into a semblance of poise,
I will still need a cane
and shoulder
to help me walk,

and I will need great patience
from any who try to decipher
my slurred speech.”ⁱ

John Donne (1572-1631), at the turn of the 17th century, wrote:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new...

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.ⁱⁱ

They were looking for that feeling that those two disciples had on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus opened the whole scriptural history to them, and for the first time, they saw Jesus in the whole thing—

and they realized later that it felt like their hearts were burning within them.

It's a time of absolute transcendence. They're *feeling* it in a way that practically all religious people could envy: I want to feel it that deeply, that resoundingly;

I want to be that inspired, which literally means to have the Spirit in me;

I want to be that enthusiastic, which is literally *en-theos*, God-in me.

Luke, however, is the physician among the Gospel writers: he may have a flair for eloquence, but he is the no-nonsense reporter of the actual, human condition, which is just how he experiences Jesus and wants to share Jesus with you and me.

I notice that when wonder and amazement threaten to overtake the disciples, Jesus brings them back to the physical realities of the world in which God has called them to live and work and minister as active apostles.

When they were at table in the house in Emmaus,
Jesus took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them.
It is the moment of true communion,
in which they recognized that he was there among them.

And he vanished from their sight.

Maybe that was his way of saying, “All right,
you’ve got the word,
you’ve got the sacrament,
and you know that I’m with you.
From now on, the ministry of the body of Christ is up to you.”

Later, when those two disciples went to tell the original eleven and their crew about what had happened, they found that the eleven were all talking in astonishment about how the risen Jesus had already appeared to Peter.

While they were talking about this universe-changing reality, Jesus came and appeared among them and said “Peace be with you,” the same

blessing John says that the risen Jesus gave to the disciples in the house when Thomas wasn't there and again when Thomas was.

But here, they were startled and terrified, as they have every right to be, and they thought they were seeing a ghost.

He said, What's the matter with you?

Look at my hands and my feet; see that it's really me!

Touch me and see;

a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones. I do.

And then he showed them his hands and his feet,
the same hands and feet that were mangled on the cross.

When grave injury is done to anyone on earth,
by hatred or fear or cruelty or random violence,
nothing can undo that injury.

The only thing someone else can do is try to stop the abuse,
protect the vulnerable, be a buffer against the abuser.

And the only possible recovery is forgiveness and reconciliation.

That's real-world ministry: not some disembodied philosophy of things
that are nice and clean and mystical,

but an earthbound commitment to make sure that wounded and starved
people—physically wounded and hungry people—are tended and fed
and kept safe from those who would do them harm.

As if to prove it—this is one of my all-time favorite moments—

While in their *joy*,

they were *disbelieving*,

and still *wondering*,

Jesus said to them:

“You guys got anything to eat?”

He punctures the sentimental, emotional, mystical, philosophical moment with the real-life request of someone who does not come to them in ghostly wisps of vague suggestion, but a bodily need that hasn't been met for days.

And again he seems to say to them,
Listen: *this is the ministry.*

As the late Luke scholar François Bovon said, Luke “makes the unforeseeable appear in the normal and the normal in the unforeseeable.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words: we will have, appropriately—
like the original disciples in whose footsteps we walk—
our moments of fear, joy, disbelief, wonder;
elation, exhilaration, stunned silence or hearts burning within us.

But he will not let us forget in all that
that there is still a world out there—
there is a world full of individual people out there—
whom God is sending us to feed and nurture,
teach and serve,
shelter and set free.

Friends, this is the ministry of the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God.

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ⁱ Rumi (1207-1273) in what I presume is a fairly loose translation, in Daniel Ladinsky, ed., *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from East and West* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), 83.

ⁱⁱ John Donne “Batter my heart, three-person’d God”

ⁱⁱⁱ Francois Bovon (trans. James Crouch), *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 401.