

Faith Mennonite Church  
May 8, 2011 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Gregg Richardson

**“That’s a very good question...”**  
*Luke 24:13-35*

“Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes.”  
“Lift your glad voices in triumph on high, for Jesus hath risen and we shall not die.”  
“Christ has arisen, alleluia!...for our redeemer has burst from the tomb, even from death, dispelling its gloom.”  
“He rises glorious from the dead, all glory to our risen head!”  
“Thine is the glory, risen conquering son! Endless is the vict’ry thou o’er death has won.”  
“Christ is risen! Shout Hosanna! Celebrate this day of days!”  
“O sons and daughters, let us sing! The King of heav’n, the glorious King, o’er death today rose triumphing.”

Every Easter, we sing these alleluias and these hosannas from our hymnals. It’s a celebration of organ and brass, egg casseroles and little girls in spring dresses. It’s been a long winter, and honestly, a gloomy Lent, and far be it from me to snow on anybody’s Easter. And yet, when we return to the gospels themselves, to those earliest, inchoate accounts of resurrection, we discover ourselves leaving behind the alleluias of the church triumphant... Instead, we are clearly entering a more mysterious country...

Certainly the disciples and camp-followers of Jesus are taken by surprise. Certainly there is a period of confusion and half-skeptical belief. But even as the implication of this odd masque begins to unfold, it remains obvious that it is not a triumphant public spectacle, announced with hosannas and trumpets.

Although they are the source of the foundational doctrine of the church, the gospel accounts of the resurrection are surprisingly muted, even haphazard. Most ambiguous of course, is the ending of the gospel of Mark: a group of women arrive to provide burial rites for Jesus’ body, and find that the stone door of the tomb is rolled back; a young man in white sitting next to the doorway, tells them Jesus has been raised, and the joyful women...well, they flee in terror, and tell no-one...the end...

In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene comes alone on Sunday morning, sees the stone rolled back, returns to fetch Peter and a mysterious unnamed disciple, and they find the tomb empty. After the other two return home, Mary encounters two, well, angels who ask why she is crying, and then she sees a man whom the narrator identifies as Jesus, while explaining that she “doesn’t know” it is Jesus. When the man calls her by name, she responds saying “Master!,” but even then he warns her not to touch him, because he has “not yet ascended to the Father.” She immediately leaves to tell the others.

And then, there is today’s gospel of Luke. Again, Mary and the women find an empty tomb, and “two men in dazzling white clothes;” again, they tell the others, and in this account, Peter alone returns, yet finds nothing but the same empty tomb. And that evening a disciple named Cleopas, who otherwise does not appear anywhere in the New Testament, along with a second unidentified disciple, meets a stranger on the road, and the three of them engage in a long peripatetic discussion of the meaning of this shocking-crucifixion, and its mysterious sequel. On their arrival home in Emmaus, they ask the stranger to stay for dinner. The story offers little detail of their

mealtime discussion, but apparently they are increasingly convinced that the scriptures foreshadow the resurrection of a crucified messiah. Then when the stranger blesses and breaks the bread, he suddenly vanishes. At this point they are convinced that he was Jesus.

Furtive and contradictory, these stories are clearly not offered as a conspectus of dogma, a creed that delineates the boundaries of belief. These are instead vignettes of witnesses gripped by sudden existential crisis, virtually seized by faith. The germinal faith they describe is not the rote of the Nicene creed, but the silent epiphany of Rilke's "Torso of an Archaic Apollo." In Rilke's poetic description of a headless marble torso, he overturns the roles of aesthetic observer and blind, passive stone: the marble, he says, is "breaking out of all its contours/like a star/for there is no part/that does not see you/You must change your life."

You must change your life. The resurrection stories do not allow you the illusion of objectivity. Instead the story sees into you, reveals you to yourself. This is the essence of faith in the gospels. Gospel faith is not a question of belief or creed. Belief, in fact, is the enemy of faith, according to historian of religion James Carse. In his book *The Religious Case Against Belief*, Carse describes the way that systems of belief acquire an existence of their own, foreclosing discussion and argument, concealing novel insights, disallowing subjective construction of meaning. Fundamentalisms and enforced orthodoxies actually shut off faith, close the door...But dialog and argument, the search for insight, the construction of meaning, is, according to theologian Paul Tillich, the very root of faith. In his book *The Dynamics of Faith*, he says: "Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence...If [a concern] claims ultimacy it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim, and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name."

Somewhere deep in the psyche of each of us, whether we recognize it or not, lies some ultimate concern, according to Tillich. Our task is to discover this concern within ourselves, to strip it of both legitimate and demonic pretensions to ultimacy, and to live as authentic persons. This is the road on which the gospels lead us. Jesus in the gospels confronts questions of personal and social ethics, political and religious allegiances, piety and doubt, family relationships, poverty, suffering and oppression—all of them profound and universal human problems. And in the end, all these questions are crucified and buried, leaving his stunned and demoralized disciples to wonder where to turn next.

Then, like the sudden appearance of Yahweh at the end of the book of Job, it is both climax and anticlimax, when the ultimate concern, the question of being and non-being itself, suddenly and momentarily reveals the light behind the entire shadow play. The abrupt endings of the three synoptic gospels, their phantom resurrection appearances seemingly tidied up with brief dogmatic codas, seem to leave us with only two choices: either the answer to life, the universe and everything, like the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* reveals, really is forty-two, or...the question is thrown back to us, in the light of the gospel, in the light of these disquieting encounters, now blinding, clarified, ineluctable: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap."

There is not much left to say, and we are saying it. Our 2000 year argument over the meaning of the gospels, stands, more than any other religious symbol, as the real icon of our faith. It's the single most potent expression of our ultimate concern. And it began here, on the road to Emmaus. Two disillusioned enthusiasts (husband and wife, perhaps?), struggling to make sense of their sudden loss of meaning, their belief systems have perhaps just collapsed, and there is nothing left for them, but talk or silence...so they talk...

Our epiphanies, like our ultimate confrontation with being and non-being, are personal, but the meanings we construct out of them are always communal. This communal formation is not a naïve choice of romantic solidarity; we are social beings in our essence. In his seminal book *I and Thou*, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes this formative power of relationships. None of us is simply an “I”, he tells us, we are an “I” only in relation to another. If we are an “I” in an “I-You” relationship, we are a different “I” than we would be in an “I-It” relationship. Talk itself is not essentially communal, if the talk is about things as “It.”

Our friends on the road are joined by a stranger. The dynamic changes. Who is this traveler, who seems to come from some unknown region? Are you the only one who doesn't know what's happened in this past week? But curiosity is soon trumped by fatigue. As it is with all catastrophes, the emptiness must be filled with talk. Wearily, they must explain yet again...how else to gain control over this story, how to codify, mythologize, disarm it...more talk...

When Nicodemus comes by night to Jesus in the gospel of John, as we heard this year early in Lent, he too, wants to talk. Nicodemus wants a reason to believe. Schooled in the rigorous discipline of the Mosaic law, he is intrigued by this prophet, but unable to find a place for him in his own belief system. “We know you are a teacher from God, for no-one could do these signs...but...” Jesus cuts him short with a deliberately ambiguous game on the Greek word *anōthen*: I don't fit into your belief system. Take it from the top. Start over. Nicodemus wants precision, chooses one literal meaning: how can one enter the womb and be born a second time? Jesus responds with another word game, this time on *pneuma*: spirit, wind, breath. You can't, he says, the wind blows wherever it will, it just happens, it's not your choice...Nicodemus tries one more time: How can these things be? How do I make this happen? Why can't I get a straight answer? Because, says Jesus, you're a teacher, not a learner...

It just happens. We don't choose faith—it chooses us. We have arrived home at last. Our three travelers have gathered for an evening supper. The talk continues into the night. There must be questions, challenges, dialectical volleys. But Cleopas and his companion are tiring. The wind of the spirit blows where it will. The stranger takes the loaf, and with a word of blessing breaks it. There is a sudden blinding moment of recognition, and the interlocutor is gone. There is no part that does not see you—you must change your life. “Were not our hearts burning within us?” they tell one another.

The demoralized band of disciples gather in Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit. The wind blows where it will, and when it comes, it brings with it more words. “You will be given the words to say,” Jesus tells them. They speak in many tongues. They write gospels and epistles, they preach sermons, they recount myths and legends, they draft creeds and systematic theologies, they pour forth testimonies from the sinner's bench. Our 2000 year argument over the meaning of the gospels, stands, more than any other religious symbol, as the real icon of our faith.

“That's a very good question,” replied composer John Cage, during a discussion following his *Lecture on Nothing*, “That's a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer.”