

Heart Burn

Luke 24:13-35

April 11, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

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Luke 24:13-35 ³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ 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?" ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ 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. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² 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?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

One of the most popular of modern parables, often appearing on posters or condensed on greeting cards, is *Footprints*. A storyteller looks back upon her journey of life and sees two sets of footprints; one set is her

own and the other set is Christ's who walks with her. But, the teller of the story notices a lengthy stretch of time when there was only one set of footprints, and she feels a sense of abandonment. "Where were you, Lord, during this very difficult time of my life?" she asks. And Christ answers, "That was a time, my child, when I carried you."

It is a different kind of parable that Luke tells in today's scripture story, about Cleopas and an unidentified disciple leaving Jerusalem on the first Easter day. They are dispirited, distressed and confused. The past week had been a roller-coaster – beginning in exuberance with Jesus riding into Jerusalem and the people shouting "Hosanna!" and ending in crucifixion. Now an astounding new element had been added: the mind-bending witness of the women who had found Jesus' tomb empty.

These two had much to discuss on their walk to Emmaus... wherever in the world that was. No one has ever found such a village, neither one that survives today or any that can be identified in antiquity. The name Cleopas doesn't appear in any gospel's census of Jesus' followers and the other is unnamed. They are anonymous believers walking an unidentified route to a non-existent town who are joined by a stranger who is unrecognizable as their friend.

In 1872 Samuel Butler wrote a satirical novel entitled *Erehwon*. "Erehwon" is *Nowhere* spelled backwards, and implies "anywhere" or "everywhere." Butler's title made universal whatever he chose to expose as human folly. Perhaps Emmaus, too, like Erehwon, is "everywhere" or "wherever" – perhaps even "here."

Like all good parables, Luke's story is also universal. It presents that life as a journey and though it matters little where we are going, it matters enormously with whom we walk and what that relationship leads us to

become. That is, what matters ultimately is what or who makes “our hearts burn within us...” A burning heart is a revelation of purpose, direction, and goal. It is a prelude to turning around and going another direction.

That’s what the two Emmaus walkers did. They canceled their escape and returned to Jerusalem where the threat of arrest and execution loomed. They went back because they needed the community of believers to help make sense of what the passionate intensity of their hearts was forcing them to recognize and act upon.

Where is the passion in the church today? Where on the road of life, on our journeys to Erehwon, Emmaus, or tomorrow do we encounter the stranger that Cleopas couldn’t recognize? What does it take to make our hearts burn with a fire of the soul? Is it only after a rather unfortunate encounter with a sneaky chili pepper, or are there times in our lives when the fire in the belly is not some selfish craving, nor fleeting thrill, but a seizing of the heart by a vision so grand and fine that we cannot but engage, and not only is our world changed but we are changed? What is it that opens our eyes and recognizes the stranger who meets us on the road, and we respond by turning around and doing something that will make a difference in this life God has given us?

Therein lie some interesting contrasts between the “footprints” parable and the “Emmaus” parable. Both image life as a journey and both emphasize the presence of Christ. But “footprints” pictures life’s journey as solitary – “Jesus walks with me.” “Emmaus” pictures the journey as community – “Jesus walks with us.” “Footprints” implies that Jesus’ presence is always recognizable and comforting. “Emmaus” tells us that it is not always easy to recognize where Christ will be found, or in what guise he will appear, or where he is leading, nor is it automatic at all that Christ will

necessarily be with me, or with us, when we want that presence. The climax line in “footprints” says, “That is when I carried you.” The climax in “Emmaus” is the reversing of their direction and returning to community and mission. The implication in “footprints” is that Christ will accompany you wherever you want to go. The teaching in “Emmaus” is that Jesus is leading us where he wants us to go.

I am not trying to be critical of the “footprints” parable. It’s a lovely story and bears worthy truth. But it is too small a story; it reflects too short and too private a journey. We are not just God’s children who sometimes need to be carried, though we are that. We are disciples who are deemed capable of carrying the gospel – doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly. We are called to serve, not to be served. We follow Christ, not the other way around.

Like the old song, we’ve got to have *heart*, a metaphor which pops up twice in the passage with dramatically contrasting meaning. “*How slow of heart you are to believe all that the prophets have declared!*” Jesus says when he comes upon these dispirited and depressed disciples who are determined to walk away from the scene of challenge into anonymity and safety. But they experience a change of heart. “*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road,*” they say when the scales fall from their eyes and they don’t merely see...they know! And, once they knew – though the stranger vanished – the *presence* welled up in their awareness, and not just an awareness of Christ’s presence but of their responsibility.

Where, my friends, on we on this cardiac continuum? Are we of the *burning hearts* or the *slow hearts* categories? Slow-heartedness, I suppose, is some kind of suspension in the middle, neither hot nor cold. That’s where

our powerful Presbyterian poise leaves us, I suppose – passionately moderate in just about everything. It should help us to remember that the personal seal of John Calvin, the father of our Presbyterian tradition, was an outstretched hand with a flame held in his palm. The line is that Presbyterians do everything “decently and in order.” What would it take to make it “decently and in *ardor*?”

Admittedly, there are countless spiritual traps to fall into in matters of the heart. Passion can lead us to tilt at windmills; it can lead us to mistake intensity for discipleship; it can lead us into an activism that is ultimately destructive. To remain calm, aloof, and disengaged as a defense is a poor corrective. Long ago Max Weber observed that the emergence of the modern era created “secularists without spirit; sensualists without heart.” What a sorry contrast that is to “were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us on the road?”

Such burning in the heart is not something to medicate or else we laze about feeling good even in the face of the world’s peril and pain. So many contemporary notions of spiritual adventure seem artificial and precious, individualized and socially disengaged. Indeed, we’ve redefined goodness as being inoffensive and personal engagement as spectating. Maybe contemporary theologian Jennifer Lopez expressed the spirit of the age best, when she told an interviewer, “I have lots of spiritual books around; I don’t even know the titles. At the end of the day it’s all about being, like, a good person – centered, focused, and at peace.”

Well, no, I don’t think so. The issue for a disciple is to be faithful, and faithfulness always implies choice, change, and risk. The goal is not self-satisfaction but the satisfaction of Christ’s call, that we care for the poor, the marginal, the distressed; that we minister to the afflicted in mind

and body; that we are kind to our enemies, merciful to those who have offended us, and seek justice for the weak. The goal is not personal peace, but Christ's peace. For the slow of heart, this is *heart burn* in the worst sense of the word; for those with *hearts burning within us*, this is the way of the cross.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "Jesus was not primarily a teacher. He was a reformer. He came not only to *say* something but to *do* something – to call his nation to repentance, to cleanse the synagogue of its sterile conventionality and the temple of its abuses, to open the gates of salvation to folk who were forgotten or despised, to usher in a new era of righteousness."

Looking back upon our lives we see the intersecting footprints of hundreds of others who have walked before us, follow after us, run *into* us. Where are we all going, and for what purpose? Are we determined to choose our route, choose our companions, and choose when or where to engage or disengage, or are we willing to be chosen for a journey someone else has planned for us? At some point in each gospel Jesus encounters those who would become his disciples. The relationship he developed with them was not founded on therapeutic comfort or escape from toil and stress. He said, "Follow me," and they entered an adventure whose spills and thrills were daunting, disturbing, and finally dangerous. Joseph Campbell wrote that we must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us. Whatever Cleopas and the other escapee from Jerusalem were planning, they couldn't follow through with it, because the Living Christ was on the road, too, setting alight their hearts. If we see a line of single footprints ahead of us in the sand, consider that it may be Jesus hoping we'll catch up.