

The Other Disciple  
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Today we heard an ancient Greek name: Cleopas. This is the only place that we ever hear of this person in the whole New Testament. In the Gospel of John, Mary, wife of Cleopas is mentioned as one of the women standing at the foot of the cross. But they are both shadowy figures, not counted as any of the twelve disciples, but clearly close to the action. Some people think that, in the passage read today, it was Mary, wife of Cleopas that was walking with him along the road to Emmaus. Once again, this is an unknown route. Even the village, Emmaus, cannot be placed on any map: we only know its distance from Jerusalem: about 7 miles.

For those of us who are students of history, we'd like more to go on: more names, more detail, some follow-up stories. But perhaps we can use this anonymous character on an unknown path, this *other disciple*, male or female, one of "the two of them going to a village called Emmaus." Maybe we can use this character as a anonymous gateway, so to speak, into an unknown and barely knowable experience. Let's contemplate the inner life and thoughts of the other disciple on that first Easter and try to get inside his or her head:

Slow walk, a heavy walk, along one path we do know,  
the path back to the home we once knew;  
for the new path he showed us vanished with his death,  
signposts scattered with our hope in the dust.  
Now we are certain that we are uncertain.  
Loss lives in the pit of the belly.

Slow walk, heavy talk,  
questions...questions, we thought *he* was our answer,  
questions... questions, doubt and confusion.  
The world had changed color through his stories.  
Life had gained vigor as we followed –  
now, how do you follow a ghost you cannot see?

Slow talk, no talk, walking without knowing who, now?  
Where, now? What? And how?  
How ... now that he is gone? Why ... does he *have* to be gone?

No talk, heavy walk, full of emptiness ...  
Stopped short from believing: our disbelief plays a dissonant tune in our heads.  
A slow walk, just the two of us, wanting to know what happened.  
Then someone joins us.  
We continue to walk as these words are spoken:  
"What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

He walked with us, a stranger, a stranger who did not know to grieve,  
who did not drag his feet, who had something new to say.  
His lack of news - didn't he know? - and lack of grief - surprised us,

though we accepted his coming beside us.  
His wisdom warmed us, deeply, somehow, though we hardly knew it at the time.  
He did not know why we were grieving. But he understood our prophets' words,  
and, he was generous: he opened himself and God's story, so we would see ourselves.  
He called us fools too, but we bore the reproof, buoyed as we were by the word and the walk.

We didn't want the day to end, then.  
Stay with us, we said. We are hungry for more of that word.  
When he said yes, we were glad. Glad to host and serve.

Home at last, and now a chance to wash our dusty feet,  
to be embraced by family we had long ago left behind;  
to sit, to sleep; to rest from our weary woes.  
We said: make ours your own this night.  
The meal:  
Fish, remember the fish we ate with our friend, eyes moistened by memories.  
Bread, fresh-baked today.  
Were we surprised when he took on the host's role and spoke words of blessing:  
"*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, Hamotzi lechem min haaretz.*  
That cadence so familiar.  
Then he broke that blessed bread with a certain twist of the wrist,  
and on the hands a shadow of a wound....  
What? Him! Surprise, shock – delight – at last we see!  
New life burst forth in our weary bones, new life in grieving hearts.  
Then gone, but no, he yet remained, remains, he lives – he is here!

Then...fast walk, lightning quick talk: the sun had set...  
Seven miles back in darkness flew by, illuminated by wonder,  
propelled by the need to share.

No talk – Lord, we are almost running through the dark streets,  
looking for the house where the others are staying.  
Then the words tumble out on both sides: the women were speaking the truth! Simon has seen him!  
So have we – He taught us on the road!  
Then he was made known to us when we saw him break the bread!

Almost as though his name invoked his presence, he stood there,  
and spoke the best greeting, the peace we long for.  
Even though it was not the first time, we were shocked – I can't deny it.  
A ghost or a man?  
But he almost was laughing as he said, "Look at me. Look at these hands and feet. Touch me.  
And then he *did* laugh, as we stood there, disbelieving and still lost in wonder,  
he *did* laugh and say, "Have you anything here to eat?"  
What could we do but return to the table, the place of all our joy, all our learning,  
and taste and see that the Lord is good.

So speaks the other disciple in a storm of grief and wonder. We know those storms. We  
have lost friends. We have lost trust. We have felt threatened by forces beyond our control. We

have tried to go home again, as a last resort. And sometimes, we have had moments of recognition, and a return of hope.

It is comforting, somehow to know that the first reaction in the return of hope is disbelief. Earlier in this chapter, the disciples had called the first announcement by the women of the empty tomb “an idle tale.” Nonsense, they said. That’s not the way the world works. But year after year, in churches ever since, we talk about God and Jesus; we tell of a cross, an empty tomb, and a risen Messiah. We have come to believe that the story is the farthest thing from being a superficial or idle tale, because this Easter walking and talking is one of the most serious stories we know. It is about death and resurrection and a hope that is stronger than all darkness and earthly despair. It is about an intimate insight, a deep, and personal connection that changes our future.

Whenever we read about impossible miracles (and maybe resurrection stories most of all) we remember that they are designed to astonish, and astonishment, is really a blend of belief and disbelief. Some may say “OK, but does a witness to resurrection have to believe in Jesus’ physical resurrection from the dead?” Many people struggle with variations on this question, and so this is the right place to name and explore the role of doubt in the life of faith. Do you have doubts? You’re in good company, both in scripture and in church! Do you have faith? You’re in good company, too, though much of scripture warns against letting our believing become too settled. We would do better to be in the mind of the other disciple, who is not wrestling so much with belief as with experience. And in fact, taking Luke’s story seriously means reconsidering whether settled “belief” should be the goal. A blend of joy, disbelief, and wondering would seem much closer to the astonishment a miracle is supposed to engender - and after all, such a state of joy/disbelief/wonder may well keep our hearts and minds humble and open to what the Spirit does next. Viewed from this angle, it may be more faithful, not less, to say “I am astounded by the physical resurrection” rather than “I am convinced of it.” In the experience of the other disciple we catch a glimpse of the difference between mere “belief” and a living faith. These ancient stories, to which we rightly return again and again, aim to astonish us, to leave us “taken aback,” to call into question our assumptions about what may or may not be “possible” and “impossible,” and so to invite us into an open-minded, open-hearted posture of disbelief, wonder, and Easter joy.

We are in the season of Eastertide, and Easter is about a loving re-connection between God and us that exceeds all our expectations. It happened first to the women disciples, who’d been kept on the margins of a patriarchal and oppressive world until Jesus included them the greatest story ever told. It happened to Cleopas and the other disciple, downcast and confused on their 7-mile walk, until a stranger opened the Scriptures for them. It happened to the other disciples, who were huddled there in the upper room behind locked doors, afraid that they also faced death by crucifixion until God in Christ quieted their fears and opened their eyes at last.

Perhaps we can experience that loving re-connection as well. We might ask, “What would have happened if these two disciples hadn’t welcomed this stranger?” We might ask, what if they had played it safe and processed the story and stayed home? What if, after meeting Jesus over the meal of broiled fish, they had said, “No thanks. It’s great to see you, but we don’t want to be witnesses of these great things. Thanks for the emotional boost, though.”

I am so glad that the other disciple, confused and downcast and bruised as she or he was, was welcoming, was eager to walk that 7 miles back to Jerusalem to share, and was courageous to live as a witness to the love of Jesus. It gives me hope that I can be the other disciple too. Amen.