



Easter 3, Year A – May 8, 2011

The Road to Emmaus

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

The world is falling apart. Shocking, I know, but the evidence is adding up. Almost 10 years ago the twin towers fell, dissolving before our eyes into plumes of smoke, over 3000 lives lost. Across the ocean we saw images of whole communities dancing in the street and we were called to arms. Off to war, a mission for revenge and in Iraq the number of soldiers lives lost is only surpassed by the number of citizens caught in "collateral damage", leaving their families to mourn alone. Not quite the right target, troops move into Afghanistan and the troops fall side by side with civilians, leaving only tears behind.

On a warm summers day just six years ago the winds on the Southern coast of the U.S. pick up speed and with each turn of the hurricane more water is raised up only to be dropped with fierce strength on the shores of the Gulf Coast. A city, the city of New Orleans, a city built beneath the level of the sea and therefore built on hope, is pummelled over days. The lives lost are enough to mourn but the devastation of the aftermath - the attempt to rebuild and thrive again, continues still.

From across the oceans we witness uprising after uprising; people trying to raise their voices to regain their rights only to be brutally quieted by those who are too attached to power to let go. Country after country falls, those crying out for justice silenced with the shot of a gun or the dropping of a bomb. They cry out, again and again they cry, and again and again it seems no one is there to listen.

And here at home, news of a brutal slaying on a Greyhound bus, one life lost and more than a dozen for ever changed. In our city, our own communities, people go missing never to be found and news of abuse and neglect sometimes dominate the news and in our own homes, in our own hearts, we grieve the loss of what might have been.

And in our own lives, in our very own homes, we remember those who have been lost to tragic events, some still living but no longer a part of our lives, and some whose lives have passed and whom we have grieved and given back to God.

Oh yes, and in case you haven't heard, it has been stated with some authority that the world will essentially end on May 21st. Jesus will return and take the righteous back to himself and for the next five months any who are left behind will be begging for relief through death as Jesus wrestles with Satan. While I was listening to these accounts of the upcoming rapture my cheeky self thought that the second part of this prophecy - the part where the whole universe explodes on October 31st, is rather easy to make because anyone who matters will be already dead. It's easy to make a prediction when there's no one to prove or disprove it. What I do believe is that it is hubris for any of us to declare that we can possibly know the heart of God which includes predicting the end of the world.

Just in this past week a team of supremely trained soldiers entered a compound and exacted revenge on the face of terrorism. And in that part of the world they saw images of Americans dancing in the streets. And so it begins again. A cycle of hatred and misunderstanding and the violence continues.

Is this the life that Jesus promised? Is this what God had in mind when he sent his son into the world? Weren't all of these problems to be solved by his coming?

From today's Gospel one of the questions that we might ask is, would we, in our grief, in our disbelief, in our horror, in our incredulity at the sheer amount of bad news, recognize Jesus on the road.

The disciples walking along the road, away from Jerusalem to a sleepy little village called Emmaus, are so caught up in their sorrow that at first they barely take a moment to acknowledge this man, this intruder, on the way. In disbelief at the thought that he hasn't heard the news - the news that has profoundly changed their lives forever - they recount the story of the past weeks and days. Do you not know? Have you not heard?

In their world, in the world of Israel, in the area of Jerusalem, life was not good. The Romans were cracking down, trying to play nice with these people who called themselves Jews, but really they wanted whatever they could get from them. The Jews were playing by the book, by the rules written in the scripture, declaring people unworthy who were not able to play by those rules. The walls were closing in and then this Jesus, this breath of fresh air, comes and declares that there is a better way. He declares that there can be peace through justice rather than through conquering. He declares that people can pray directly to God, his father, and that God will be paying attention. He says that some of the rules of the law are not so binding, that God will not forsake them if they light a fire on the Sabbath or slaughter a pig to eat. He came in and changed the world and then, then, he was gone. Hung on a cross to die, he was no longer there to lead them.

Chatting, surely out of politeness at first, the travelers on the road find themselves fascinated by this stranger who was clarifying the scripture stories that they had heard their whole lives. Intrigued, they found themselves leaning in, wanting more, and when he walked as if to continue on the road, they invited him to join them for a meal. They invited him into the gift of hospitality.

In our grief, in our attempt to take in an overwhelming amount of information, most of it bad, do we, too, miss those around us who might be offering us wisdom? Do we, in our busy-ness and our distraction, miss those fellow travelers who might open up our understanding in a whole new way? I suspect that we do. I suspect that we, all of us, miss the chances that we have to learn new things and understand things more deeply. We become so distracted by the demands of daily life and the breadth and depth of the problems of the world to be fixed its as if we cannot hear one more thing, even if that thing is wisdom and comfort.

It is not until they, the disciples on the road, invite the stranger in to share a meal, that the true nature of Jesus is revealed. It is in the breaking of the bread, when Jesus takes it, blesses it, breaks it and shares it, that he is revealed to his fellow travelers. It is then, in this simple act, that their eyes are opened and they see their saviour in their midst.

For the disciples, for those who were left behind so many years ago, the absence of the corporal presence of Jesus was palpable. They had him, they followed him, learned from him and had come to worship him, and then suddenly he was gone - torn from their midst.

For us, for those of us who live on faith, having never met Jesus in the flesh and yet who yearn for his presence, for us, for us who live on faith that even as he walks with us we await his coming again, we are like the travelers on the road. We are actually in his presence but we do not recognize him along the way.

But then we come here. We come together to share hospitality and to remember, to incorporate him into ourselves and we fully recognize him in the breaking of the bread, just as those disciples did so long ago. Many scholars now believe that our tradition of the Eucharist actually comes from this moment, this moment of recognition at Emmaus, rather than the last supper in the Upper Room. While in the Upper Room Jesus' followers could not know the yearning of missing someone once they are gone. While in the Upper Room they still did not understand how he was about to die and give his life for their sakes. But at Emmaus, in a sleepy little village, Jesus revealed himself to those who, like us, felt his absence and yearned for his presence.

In the Eucharist, Jesus is fully present to us, just as he was so many years ago. So in our lives, when the world seems to be coming to an end, when the world

seems full of doom and gloom, when we become so entrenched in our bad news and predictions of more to come, Jesus comes to us. Even when we do not recognize our fellow traveller, he recognizes us. And when we come together, we, as the body of Christ, he reveals himself to us in the breaking of the bread.

And for that, we give thanks to God.

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