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Easter/Resurrection of the Lord
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Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

...AND THEY RECOGNIZED HIM

LUKE 24:13-35

At last we arrive at Easter, the story through which we interpret all others in Scripture. Easter is a celebration and a feast. The liturgy is familiar: “Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! This memorial acclamation---this affirmation of faith---gives meaning to all others. It strengthens us in life and comforts us in death. It is a call to worship. It proclaims, as boldly as ever, that the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. It is manna that God provides us in the desert; it is milk and honey served to us in Canaan. God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for every human being who has suffered or died, is suffering or dying or will experience suffering or death.

In Jesus Christ, John Calvin proclaims, God’s grace, mercy and peace are revealed most clearly, even more clearly than they are in Scripture or in any tradition that emerges from our interpretations of them. For Calvin, Scripture functions as “spectacles”---a telescope, binoculars or contact lenses---through which we understand God’s faithfulness toward all creation. Faith is given only by God, because faith, like life itself, is only God’s to give. God gives and forgives---nothing that we deserve---and yet this is the essence of grace. On every page of Scripture---in both the Old and New Testaments---there is evidence of grace---God’s grace---bubbling like lava in the bowels of a volcano. On Good Friday, it seems as if all is calm; all is quiet, and yet God does not slumber. Resurrection is to come. On Easter morning, faithful women arrive at Jesus’ tomb to find that the volcano has erupted. God has forgiven the

seemingly unforgiveable---our pride and despair. This is an act of amazing grace, grace that floods the streets of Jerusalem and oozes toward Emmaus.

Cleopas and Simon are eventually caught in this flood, which proves to be beyond anything that they ask or imagine. The story of their Emmaus journey is one-part comedy and one-part tragedy, as is our experience. It is funny what one remembers from college (and scary to contemplate what one forgets). What I remember from a drama class that I had as a freshman is a professor suggesting that all stories follow one of two storylines (or some combination thereof). The first is someone takes a trip; the second is a stranger comes to town.

Obviously, Luke's Gospel follows this pattern. The story is set somewhere between a city and a village, between Jerusalem and Emmaus. Cleopas and Simon are traveling together, searching for meaning midst the tragedy that has befallen Christ and his cause. Who knows what they were saying? Luke does not speculate, and yet I find myself wondering, "Are they gossiping or grappling with grief or guilt?" Whatever they are doing, Jesus interrupts, and they do not recognize him. A stranger has come to town. Or more specifically, a stranger has come to them between points A and B. He meets them where they are and joins them on their quests spiritual and otherwise.

Jesus, even as a stranger, is as inquisitive as ever. He asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" Observation: Jesus says "along" when he may have said "away," as in "away from the movement" or "away from crucifixion." Jesus' question paralyzes Cleopas and Simon, who prove incapable of answering him except by looking sad. They opt to protect themselves emotionally by answering his question with a question: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Catch the irony? Jesus does; in fact, he savors it by asking, ever so innocently, "What things?" What things? Cleopas and Simon update him on the events of Holy Week before interpreting the significance of the tragedy. They confide in him (oh, the freedom that goes with anonymity). Cleopas

and Simon confess to Jesus that they have doubts about Jesus being the Messiah (feel the plot thickening; apparently, Luke's recipe for a story calls for another smidgen of irony).

Cleopas and Simon pronounce him dead by saying, "We had *thought* that he was the one to redeem Israel, but...but now---now---his body is missing. Women went to the tomb early this morning only to return with spices splattered all over their bodies. It was as if they had seen a ghost. They reported that even though Jesus' body was not there, angels were, angels who proclaimed that Christ is risen, just as he said that he would be. Investigators were sent to corroborate the story, and still are unable to produce a body with or without a spirit. You would think that if Jesus were resurrected, he would appear to human beings, especially those who love him." Do not let anyone tell you that Thomas is only one who doubts or that Peter is the only one who hears a cock crow. In what proves to be a third ironic twist, Cleopas and Simon stand before Jesus yearning to, and yet doubting that they will, see him again. If we listen closely, perhaps we will hear faintly in the distance, nails being hammered and injustice being served.

Why does Jesus let Cleopas and Simon twist in the wind? Why does Jesus wait to reveal himself until after doubts are confessed and this series of mini-betrayals ensues? To me, the most provocative statement in this story comes early when Luke observes, "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him?" Why? Should they have recognized him? Apparently, Jesus does not look exactly like they remember him; apparently, there is no evidence of crucifixion. Jesus is well enough to engage them in dialogue and to journey with them towards Emmaus. If he had to come to them bruised and nail-torn, hungry and homeless, surely, they would have recognized him, because, as Jesus proclaims elsewhere in the Gospels, "When you do it unto the hungriest, the sickest or the most hardened criminal, you have done it unto me." Does God keep Cleopas and Simon from recognizing Jesus (like God hardens Pharaoh's heart just before Moses leads Israel out of Egypt)? Or have Cleopas and Simon stopped looking for

Jesus? Have they stopped looking for Easter, because they still are absorbing the impact of Good Friday?

A story that I have been following since December is the state of Pakistani politics following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The history of political movements that empower oppressed peoples---and especially the stories of their leaders---fascinate me. What motivates a person to persevere in the face of adversity? How does one articulate a vision and chase that dream when he or she knows that pursuit of this vision will lead inevitably to a brutal and torturous death? Because this person has that vision in the first place, and this vision sustains her in the face of adversity, even death, because the cause, which captures the imagination of a people, engulfs that person---body, mind and spirit---to the point that the cause becomes incarnate in that person.

Benazir Bhutto served previously as Pakistan's Prime Minister, and she was well on her way to serving again when she was brutally murdered on December 27, 2007. As leader of the Pakistan People's Party, she pursued democratic reforms, freedom and openness, liberalism, tolerance and change. The pillars of her political platform were hunger, housing and health care. She studied at Harvard University, where she wrote for *The Harvard Crimson*. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius remembers her as a woman with a vibrant personality who wore Rolling Stones t-shirts and wrote intelligently and provocatively for the university's newspaper. In her book *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*, her faithfulness to a religion, a people and the world that God created is compelling. For her, death, as tragic as it is, is less tragic than a world without hope, than a world gripped by fear. Following the death of her father, who was executed in 1979, Bhutto wrote, "You can imprison a person, but not an idea. You can exile a person, but not an idea. You can kill a person, but not an idea." Bhutto's story smacks of resurrection. When the National Assembly votes tomorrow, will they recognize her?

Cleopas and Simon's recognition of Jesus comes through Word and Sacrament, as Jesus questions both their commitment and vision: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then Jesus situates his story in the context of others', beginning with Moses'. Arriving in Emmaus, Jesus begins to distance himself from Cleopas and Simon, and they invite him to stay with them (still unsure of who he is). Welcoming the stranger, celebrating the Eucharist, at last Cleopas and Simon's eyes are opened. Still it is unclear why it has taken so long for them to recognize him, but at least they are beginning to grapple with the question by saying 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?" They had stepped in the lava of God's grace and did not know it, and now that it is beginning to cool, it still is warm enough to comfort them in their doubt so that they may recognize him.

Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday and celebrates it again in Emmaus during Easter. The Words of Institution are tinged with sadness on Maundy Thursday, and yet pure joy emanates from the celebration of the Eucharist on the first Sunday of Easter. The ritual, like God's love for us, is the same whether we are filled with joy or sorrow. All that God asks of us is to open our hearts, minds, eyes, hands and mouths to receive the sacrament; and by celebrating the sacrament, we recognize him. We recognize him in ourselves and in our neighbors. Whether these feelings are tinged with bitterness or sweetness, Christ's invitation is the same: O taste and see that the Lord is good. To the God of all grace, who calls us to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.