

*Do Not Our Hearts Burn When He Speaks to Us?*

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I want you to think for a moment about the greatest disappointment you've ever experienced...maybe you worked so hard for something, and it remained out of reach. Perhaps you lost a job you loved? Has your number one dream remained unfulfilled? Maybe you put all of your money and energy into a business venture, and it failed? Maybe you gave your heart to someone who you loved so deeply, but who turned out not to be the "right one?" Revisiting such hurts, though painful, can help us understand the frame of mind of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in today's text.

I get the impression that Cleopas and his companion were shell-shocked. They were on a long walk, trying to process what just transpired in Jerusalem and most likely, all of the events that led to the crucifixion. I can only imagine their disappointment. They had abandoned their families and livelihoods, their comforts and homes to follow this man Jesus who told them that he was the messiah. Their hopes of being rewarded for their faith, of being liberated from Roman rule, of being made whole and prosperous, had all been dashed in the most outrageous of manners. Their messiah was mocked as the "King of the Jews" and crucified, dying the death of a traitor. They themselves were most likely in danger, too, since they were known-associates of Jesus.

The build-up to the death of Jesus was quite a circus. Surely, the paparazzi, in some shape or form, were there amidst the excitement...as Jesus entered into Jerusalem triumphantly, to his verbal duels with the religious leaders, to the crowds turning their backs on him and demanding his death. Because of this massive spectacle, these two disciples were in awe that the man who joined them on their journey to Emmaus had no idea about any of the events that had just transpired. Perhaps they asked him, "Do you get out much?"

The disciples proceed to give a synopsis of the life of Jesus, and they share their disappointment that they had hoped Jesus would redeem Israel.

Jesus gives these men a big hint of his identity when he explains that things were going according to plan, according to the prophets and scriptures. Still, these two travelers were unable to recognize that the man with them was the risen Lord.

It isn't until the evening had arrived and they are gathered around the table, sharing bread and the cup, that their eyes are opened as to the identity of their mysterious companion. At that moment Jesus vanishes, but the followers are inspired and they return to Jerusalem within that hour to share what had happened with the disciples.

And so begins the greatest story ever told. Indeed, in many ways, it is on the road to Emmaus where our faith tradition really began. Maybe if we met Jesus – if we had the chance to experience his aura – our faith might be unshakable. But, there were only a lucky few followers who knew Jesus and the crowds who heard Jesus, like most crowds, quickly faded into their day to day lives. So, it is with these two men that the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ begins to be told. It is on their word, and the words of the women who discovered Jesus' body was missing, that the evidence of Jesus' resurrection rests. That seems like a whole lot of pressure and responsibility for just a couple of average joes and janes. But, for over two thousand years, the story remains the same.

When I think about this story lasting for over two thousand years, having entered into thousands of villages, cities and cultures, I am floored to think that it has lasted so long and remained uncompromised. If you've ever played "telephone" you know how quickly a story can be radically altered, both intentionally and unintentionally. The realist (or some may say the "doubter") in me sees this story as being too fantastic; when human beings die, we are supposed to remain dead. I've never met someone who has been raised from the dead, and I bet you haven't either. A man who claimed to be God dying such an undignified death seems rather forgettable...

Now, I need you to once again recall your greatest disappointment and think for a moment about what helped you pick up the pieces after this difficult trial? I am assuming it has been a combination of love from family and friends and a hope that things will get better. In today's text, hope is described in what I think is a

beautifully articulate image: after their recognized their Lord, the two men on the road to Emmaus declared, “We’re not our hearts burning within us while he was speaking to us on the road?”

In what moments does your heart burn when Jesus is speaking to you? Do not our hearts burn when we witness the birth of a baby? Do not our hearts burn when the leaves return? Do not our hearts burn when a second chance is given? Do not our hearts burn when we are compelled to reach out to a stranger? Do not our hearts burn when we remember our loved ones who have passed away? Do not our hearts burn when we believe that love conquers all, even death?

The day after I returned home from a particularly painful trip to Ghana, I was to speak at a Women’s Association luncheon in Buffalo. Before I began my talk, I opened us with the Lord’s Prayer. As I heard these wonderful women saying this profound prayer, juxtaposed with thoughts of great suffering of loved ones in Ghana, I began to cry. I just stood before them and wept for a few minutes. I have since learned that this is my heart burning when Jesus speaks to me. In the midst of intense emotions – of great joy and terrible sadness – I become overwhelmed with a profound burning in my heart that something divine is in the midst of this creation.

So, as irrational as it seems, I just can’t help but be drawn to this story of the resurrection of Jesus. If we consider the fragility of life, the incredible shifts of power that have occurred over the ages, and the many forces which have tried to silence the revolutionary message of the Gospel, it is downright unbelievable that this story has proliferated all these years. Hundreds of civilizations have come and gone, but the story of Jesus remains unchanged and more popular than ever. It is in the midst of such miracles that I must sometimes keep my rational mind in check. If we are not more open, I think there are many times when we, like the two men on the road to Emmaus, miss mystical encounters with the divine. If we really think about it, that fact that we woke up and were blessed with another day of life is nothing short of a miracle.

Perhaps what is so incredible about this story is how, as improbable as it is, it resonates with all people...over a billion, in fact. Like Christians around the

world, we hold fast to the gospel because we have experienced the power of love. And truly, love is powerful! Not long after we enter this world, we experience abuses and maltreatment. Over the years, we continue to get hurt. But, when our pains and hurts are met with love, we are given hope to heal and move on. We are compelled to share our love with others and this love undermines our self-centeredness which keeps us so alone. Violence only begets violence, but when we are forgiven for our mistakes, such grace saturates our entire being. When we protect those who are weak, our purpose is never clearer. This is what Jesus was teaching – that love conquers all – and the sacrifice of his life upon the cross was the ultimate act of selfless love. And his resurrection is a proclamation that love even triumphs over death!

Like these two believers on the road to Emmaus, we are on a journey. We walk through our disappointments, and thanks be to God, we journey with others who celebrate with us, who share our joys and who also carry us when tragedy strikes. We process the on-goings of our own lives as we recall the lives and times of those who have gone before us. There are times when we feel our hopes being dashed, when we feel that we can't go on, when we long for vision and comfort. And then there are times when we see glimmers of hope and goodness, and our hearts burn when Jesus speaks to us.

So, my dear sisters and brothers, as your journeys continue, as the journey of this congregation continues into another hundred years, I urge you to share the story of Jesus. Keep your spirit open to the ways in which your hearts might burn with the presence of God. Hold fast to your faith and hold fast to the hope of the gospel – it has been our hope for ages past and will continue to do so for generations to come!