

“Making Connections”

Luke 24:13-49

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It didn't take long for the shock and grief to give way to the will to meaning. “Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus and talking about all these things that had happened.” These two disciples, one of who gets a name, Cleopas, had already moved beyond lament and were now processing what they had experienced, trying to make sense both of the death of Jesus and his resurrection, the news of which they had just learned. It doesn't take long for our minds to take over to try to help us survive our feelings, for we cannot live forever in the churning of emotions without drowning in them. Our minds set our limbs in motion to swim toward safe shores so that our energy is not wasted on the ultimately futile treading of emotional water that leads only to our deaths.

Indeed, almost the entirety of the Gospel story we just read is about the will to meaning, a term coined by psychologist and concentration camp survivor, Victor Frankl, to describe that basic human striving to find and fulfil meaning and purpose in life and in the things that constitute the living of life. The will to meaning comes alive for us and makes sense, of course, in the literary context of the end of Luke's Gospel. Unlike Mark, Luke is not content to leave things quite so ambiguous. For his readers, Luke wants to tie up a few loose ends and make sure they know that all went according to plan, even if that plan was just a little too

mindboggling to understand the first eight or ten times Jesus laid it out. And so Jesus aides the bewildered, first on the road to Emmaus when he says, “Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all the things the prophets have declared!” and then in the presence of all the disciples when he says, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Jesus knows they need to understand the significance of what has transpired so that they can fulfill their meaning and purpose in life, namely, to carry that same story of repentance, forgiveness, hope, and life to the ends of the earth. As sensitive to humanity’s “will to meaning” as to our “will to power,” that he died to overcome, Jesus gave them what they needed. The purpose for their own lives, that on Good Friday seemed to be extinguished, has been rekindled in the days following his resurrection, and will blaze on through the Roman Empire.

On that seven-mile, purpose-redeeming trip the “unrecognized” Jesus takes to Emmaus, one of the key ways he does this is through the explanation he offers to his traveling companions, as he interprets, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets...the things about himself in all the Scriptures.” We don’t know the exact content of that revelation, but we are probably safe in believing that it could easily have included the identification of himself with a certain ancient event to which the Apostle Paul makes reference in our reading from First Corinthians, namely the Passover and the Exodus to which it led. You will remember that the annual Jewish Passover celebration recalled the night on which the Angel of Death passed over

Egypt, taking the life of the first born of every family who did not have the blood of a lamb smeared upon their doorframe. Of course, what is celebrated is that while the Hebrews were in the know about this protective and salvific act, the ignorance of the Egyptians of that night led Pharaoh, who lost his own son, to let the people go, and they thus received their liberation at the hand of their providing God.

In the early church, it was not hard to make the connection between the liberation from slavery in the first Passover and exodus from Egypt and the liberation from sin and death in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The most obvious link was that Jesus' passion took place during the annual feast of the Passover. Add to that the symbolic elements of blood and sacrifice in the two events, the overwhelming power of God in the parting of the seas and the raising of Jesus from the dead, and it becomes easy to make the association that Paul is making in 1 Corinthians when he says that "our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." The word "paschal" is, of course, the adjectival form of Passover, and so Paul is saying that it is Christ's blood, smeared figuratively on the doorposts of our souls, that saves us from slavery to sin and death. This, to Paul, is certainly something worth celebrating, and so he calls upon the Corinthians to "celebrate the festival," the festival of the new passover, "not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Now, before we go further in exploring this interesting statement, a little Passover review is in order. A key element of the Passover festival is the use of

unleavened bread, that is, a flat bread, an unrisen bread, one that does not use yeast or other leavening agents. The use of unleavened bread was to remember the haste in which the Hebrews had to leave Egypt. They did not have time to let their bread rise before fleeing Pharaoh. If they had waited for the bread to rise, they would either not have made their escape or they would have been left with nothing for their journey except soggy dough. As the celebration developed, observant Jews would, and still do, before Passover, very carefully remove every trace of yeast or leaven from their homes, in a symbolic way preparing themselves to remember God's gracious act. They knew what Paul knew, even if he probably never baked a loaf of bread in his life, that it doesn't take much leaven to make a batch of batter rise. Where these festivals of God's grace are concerned, a little diligence goes a long way.

And so it is with everyday life, the point Paul ultimately seems to be making. You see, the festival of Christ's resurrection is not something we celebrate just once a year, but one we celebrate every day. These words from Paul *seem* to be used a little bit out of context on Easter, since they properly belong to the discussion of ethics Paul is in the midst of when he makes this detour into paschal theology, but in fact they couldn't be more appropriate on Easter itself. In the fifth chapter in First Corinthians from which this reading comes, Paul is calling out the Corinthians for not addressing the destructive behavior of some of their number who are threatening the spiritual welfare of the whole group. And though he could,

like he often does, simply use his apostolic authority to quash the situation – I am Paul, do as I say! – here he chooses to point the church back to Easter, back to the moment of their liberation from the sin he is condemning, back to the greatest of God’s actions in human history. You cannot allow, Paul is saying, this one speck of yeast to spoil the perpetual feast of unleavened bread. It is not that life should be compared to a relatively tasteless, bland cracker, as any of you who have tasted the matzoh used by contemporary Jews for Passover would know, but rather that life is to be compared to the festival of which unleavened bread is a part, a festival too grand and to wondrous to be spoiled by those who want to bring the party down to their own level rather than enjoy it at the heights to which God has raised it.

The Kingdom of heaven, you see, is like a royal banquet, like a joyful feast, like a wedding reception where the good wine is saved for last and never runs out. The Kingdom of heaven is a meal shared in which Christ is made known in the breaking of bread, just as it took place that night after the conversation on the road to Emmaus. And if we are to be God’s guest at this feast, we can never lose sight of the Easter event which allows us to be invited guests full of sincerity and truth rather than party crashers full of malice and evil. If you read the Old Testament enough, you’re likely to get bored reading again and again about how “I lead you out of Egypt and into to a land flowing with milk and honey.” But we human beings are a forgetful people and so At every opportunity, the recollection of that event is lifted up so that the people never, ever forget where they come from and

what God has done for them, so that their lives can make sense, so that they do not drown in the emotional waters of whatever crisis they may be going through at the moment, but may be free to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations through his name.

There's an old children's Christmas ditty that goes like this: "Christmas comes but once a year, and boy are we glad when it gets here." My friends, we are right to be happy when Easter comes, but we are sadly mistaken if we think that it comes but once a year. You see, we can't behave one way on Easter and another the other 364 days of the year. The clearing out of the leaven from our lives, the steering clear of the sin that will spoil the Easter party is not just a Lenten practice, but an everyday activity that will lead us to be sincere and truthful rather than malicious and evil. Every day must be lived out remembering the reason for the feast: the wondrousness of God's grace in passing over all of our sin. Christ still aids us in our will to meaning, by gathering us together to hear these old stories, to reconnect us with God's promises, to remember the mighty acts of God that have brought us to life and to the feast in the kingdom of heaven. Christ still reveals himself to us in the breaking of bread when we not only recognize him, but recognize each other as friends in the faith he has given us. May God always point us back the empty tomb to remind us how full and blessed we really are. Amen.