

“Truly, Madly, Deeply”
Luke 24:13-35 and 1 Peter 1:17-23
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Preached April 6, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

The strangest thing happened to me this weekend as I was working on my sermon. As I was reading the passage from 1 Peter, a word stood out for me, the word “deeply,” where Peter says, “love one another deeply from the heart.” And the phrase “love one another deeply” reminded me of the title of a movie I had seen a long time ago called “Truly, Madly, Deeply,” a story about a woman so grieved by the death of her husband that he must come back from the grave and drive her to dislike him enough so she no longer needs him as she once did. He “moves in” so she can “move on,” intentionally making such a nuisance of himself that he loses his luster in her eyes. He loved her “Truly, Madly, Deeply” enough, even in death, to make her let go of him, so she could live again. But remembering this tearjerker of a movie is not the weird thing that happened. What happened was this: that I looked it up on the Internet to remind myself who its actors were and found several comparisons, mostly favorably mind you, to the vastly more popular Hollywood film of the same period called “Ghost,” also about a dead man who remains in his beloved’s life beyond the grave. Now, just as I was reading how “Truly, Madly, Deeply” was a much better film which portrayed love more authentically than “Ghost,” I heard from the other room an unexpected noise. No it was not a ghost, but rather music coming from the television I had left turned on. So I went to turn it

off but first decided to see what was playing, and lo and behold, it was the movie “Ghost”!, a movie which, for all its hype, I had never seen. So naturally, I had to watch it to see why this divine incidence – that’s what I call coincidence – to see why this divine incidence had occurred. And so I watched the whole movie. And then I wracked my brain to figure out what I was supposed to take from this divine incidence. And this is what I learned – pay attention now: I learned that “Truly, Madly, Deeply” is indeed a much better film!

Last Sunday, we heard about the Apostle Thomas and his need to touch the wounds in Jesus hands and side. He wanted to make sure Jesus wasn’t a ghost, that he was truly raised from the dead and was not just an apparition of him as they had known him before. He wanted physical proof of the things his companions had told him. In movies where there is a ghost, there is always a scene where someone tries to punch a ghost and their hand goes right through. Thomas was content just to touch Jesus. This Sunday, we hear about two of Jesus’ disciples for whom Jesus may as well have been a ghost since they don’t recognize him. On the road to Emmaus they travel along and converse with him, but not until Jesus breaks bread with them do they recognize the man in their midst. This story tells us too, however, that Jesus was once again among the disciples in the flesh, for a ghost cannot break a loaf of bread in half. It is not that Luke necessarily wants to reaffirm that Jesus was not a ghost, but he does want to share that a very real human being was among

them. The resurrection really happened; it was neither chance nor some kind of divine slight of hand

As I mentioned last week, the Lectionary readings that follow Easter are a post-mortem on the resurrection, an explaining for those of us who are a little dense, just what it all means. Last week we learned that the motive for the resurrection was blessing, gladness, and indescribable and glorious joy. That our joy may be complete, God did the unimaginable. It is Peter who uses the phrase “indescribable and glorious joy,” a joy he attributes to the revelation in Jesus Christ that our souls are safe in God’s hands, despite what we may have to endure at the hands of others. This was an important message for Peter’s friends who were suffering at the hands of others. But he is sharing with them the reason for the resurrection and so we learn in tonight’s reading that it was precisely what happened at the hands of others, of ungodly persons, that makes our faith possible. As sadly ironic as it is, we find our joy in the death of a “lamb without defect or blemish.” Our joy is bought with the blood of Christ, and through him, Peter tells his suffering people, “*through him* you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.” The post-mortem of the resurrection continues. We can add faith and hope to joy as motives for God’s amazing gift.

In the midst of Peter’s explanation is what I would like to spend a few moments on tonight before we share together in the breaking of the bread. I spoke earlier of the “divine incidence” that led me to waste an hour and a half watching a

lame movie with really bad special effects, the significance of which I am truly still pondering. What I did come to realize in the end is that what my strange experience revealed was that it is divine incidence itself that should be proclaimed, that there is no coincidence where the death and resurrection of Christ are concerned, only that Christ “was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages” for our sakes. Linguistically speaking coincidence is just that: a coincidence, two things happening at the same time, “incidences together,” to be more faithful to the Latin roots of the word. We use the word coincidence to describe our brushes with randomness that seem almost too related for them to be random. I once met a schoolmate from Washington D.C. on the steps of Westminster Abbey in London. Neither of us knew the other would be traveling. I met another classmate from Pittsburgh Seminary in a small church in Whitefish, Montana. We hadn’t spoken since graduation three years earlier. You have your stories too, I’m sure. Meeting people we know in unexpected places is a common phenomenon that most people call coincidences. We say it is a “small world.” But I prefer to say it is God’s world and that they are divine incidences, the meaning of which may not always be clear, but hey, Jesus was destined from the foundation of the world but revealed only at the end of the age, so God has a track record of keeping things hidden from us until just the right moment. Just ask the guys on the road to Emmaus.

Peter is no believer either in coincidence, but rather points out God’s hand in our salvation. Neither the death nor the resurrection of Jesus were random events,

but divine incidences with divine purpose and timing. We may not know why God chose to bring about our salvation in this way, with God's own son being born in a manger, dying on a cross, being laid in a tomb, and being resurrected three days later, but that is the way it happened. I'm a great defender of God's sovereignty and would protect God's right to save us in whatever form God chose. I don't subscribe to the notion that Jesus *had* to come and die for us to live. I don't believe that is the only way God *could* have done it. But I do subscribe to the idea that God did indeed *choose* to do it that way, even if it doesn't make complete sense to my post-modern ears and sensibilities. It is not coincidence then that Jesus is described as "a lamb without defect or blemish" like the Passover lamb of the Jewish tradition, but divine incidence that he was without defect or blemish. It is not coincidence that Jesus' blood is the described as the currency of our redemption, echoing the same way that blood was used in Old Testament sacrifices, but divine incidence that Jesus' blood was of such value in God's eyes that it could be traded for an eternity's worth of souls. It is not coincidence that we are called to love one another "truly, madly, deeply" because that is how true love should be, but divine incidence because that is how God loved us.

It is in this direction that Peter moves, from God's acts to our own, from God's incidences of love to our own. "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth," the truth being God's acts of love through Christ, "Now that you have purified your souls so that you have genuine mutual love, love

one another deeply from the heart.” Coincidence is random. Divine incidence is intentional. Coincidence is two happenings being in the same place at the same time. Divine incidence is making sure those two things are at the same place at the same time. Peter doesn’t just say, “Love one another.” He says “Love one another deeply from the heart,” a love that suggests the divine intentionality played out through human effort. Loving deeply from the heart means that we make sure we are in the right place at the right time to love, to show the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. That witness is too important to leave to the randomness of coincidence. Peter is suggesting, I think, that we make God’s incidences our own, that through our rebirth of imperishable seed, we can bring love to the world as God did in Jesus Christ. Others might perceive our acts of divine incidence as coincidence, of the random chance of our being in the right place at the right moment to be of love or service, but there is nothing we can do about their lack of recognition. We are called to love deeply from the heart even without a reward, an expression of thanks, or the recognition that what we did we did because we love Jesus Christ. But maybe a little later on, they’ll recognize that God was present, that the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ were in their midst, even if they didn’t recognize it until the breaking of the bread. May God help us to love so truly, madly, deeply from the heart, so that one day, all the world may know of God’s incidences in Christ Jesus. Amen.