Third Sunday of Easter April 26, 2020

Two followers of Jesus leave Jerusalem on the way to a nearby town. It’s three days after the crucifixion, on the afternoon of the day the women find that the body of Jesus is no longer in the tomb. They are naturally troubled by the horrific death of their friend and master. They’ve heard some of the women who discovered the empty tomb claim that Jesus is alive, but they consider this an idle tale. The literal translation is “women’s trinkets.”

They discuss these events as they walk the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Plenty of time to contemplate the news of the day. Long enough to become weary, and hungry, looking for rest and sustenance. We don’t know why they are walking to Emmaus, but it is reasonable to assume they wish to escape a place they might be hunted down.

When Jesus approaches, they fail to recognize him, even when he asks what they are talking about so intently. Clearly, the resurrected Christ’s appearance doesn’t match the man they knew; there is something different. The two stop at his approach, looking sad, their walk a walk of hope in shambles. Jesus asks a simple question. “What is it that you are talking about?” Cleopas doesn’t answer the question. Cleopas takes what seems a confrontational stance: “Are you the **only** stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has taken place?” The ancient world didn’t need Twitter for breaking news to travel. Instead of entering into an argument, Jesus asks them “What things,” and gives them a chance to summarize what they had been talking and arguing about. That they had hoped that the one who had died on the cross would be the one who would redeem Israel.

Like any who grieve, the two disciples aren’t ready to embrace the future. Where will they find hope? They’re struggling with anxiety and fear.

Cynthia Bourgeault makes a powerful distinction between what she calls ordinary hope, “tied to outcome . . . . an optimistic feeling . . . because we sense that things will get better in the future” and mystical hope “a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. Beneath the ‘upbeat’ kind of hope that parts the seas and pulls rabbits out of hats, this other hope weaves its way as a quiet, even ironic counterpoint.”

In their grief and fear, the disciples have no idea what they need or what they want, or even what to hope for. They are groping for answers, but there are few if any immediately satisfactory ones. In this situation, what they need is mystical hope, a conviction that whatever the circumstances they are safe in God’s love, that that love is present, and that there is meaning in their plight and connection to the eternal. What they may **want** is some kind of assurance of physical safety, and a clear way forward. What they **need** is a sense of presence, not a future good, but the immediate experience of being met, held in communion, by something intimately at hand, more inward than outward.

Into their struggle, a stranger appears on the scene, a new face, they think, and his presence helps them see their situation in a new light. Luke presents a beautifully wrought story, which may be seen as an allegory of what we usually do in our worship each Sunday.

First, their discussion on the road, and the stranger’s commentary and explanation remind us of the service of the Word, where we listen and seek to discern what we experience in scripture and sermon, and creed, and prayer.

Then, we enter into the holy mysteries, bringing forward the bread and the wine, inviting strangers to join us, as the two disciples invited the mysterious stranger into the place where they were staying. There he revealed himself, not in his appearance, not in material things but in a spiritual dimension, in the breaking and sharing of bread.

The spiritual journey is designed to take us from the outward to the inward, from fear to a mystical certainty of being present in the eternal. This is what sacraments do. The bread and wine in the eucharist are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. The natural world in its beauty is an outward and visible sign of the glory of God. Like the monk who wandered the world seeking to know how to pray without ceasing, we can learn that it is as simple as breathing in and and breathing out, when we are aware of the presence of God.

When we give up the illusion of controlling our future and place our lives in the protection of God, we discover that peace that passes understanding. He may vanish from our sight, as he did in the evening in the presence of the two disciples, but his presence remains with us. And so we can say with them, “The Lord has risen indeed!”

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| *Hope is the main impulse of life.* —Ilia Delio, OSF [1]  *Because we are so quickly led to despair, most of us cannot endure suffering for long without some sliver of hope or meaning. However, it is worth asking ourselves about where our hope lies. My friend and colleague Cynthia Bourgeault makes a powerful distinction between what she calls ordinary hope, “tied to outcome . . . . an optimistic feeling . . . because we sense that things will get better in the future” and mystical hope “that is a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. Beneath the ‘upbeat’ kind of hope that parts the seas and pulls rabbits out of hats, this other hope weaves its way as a quiet, even ironic counterpoint.” She writes,*  We might make the following observations about this other kind of hope, which we will call *mystical hope*. In contrast to our usual notions of hope:   1. Mystical hope is not tied to a good outcome, to the future. It lives a life of its own, seemingly without reference to external circumstances and conditions. 2. It has something to do with *presence*—not a future good outcome, but the immediate experience of being met, held in communion, by something intimately at hand. 3. It bears fruit within us at the psychological level in the sensations of strength, joy, and satisfaction: an “unbearable lightness of being.” But mysteriously, rather than deriving these gifts from outward expectations being met, it seems to produce them from within. . .   [It] is all too easy to understate and miss that hope is not intended to be an extraordinary infusion, *but an abiding state of being*. We lose sight of the invitation—and in fact, our *responsibility*, as stewards of creation—to develop a conscious and permanent connection to this wellspring. We miss the call to become a vessel, to become a chalice into which this divine energy can pour; a lamp through which it can shine. . . .  We ourselves are not the *source* of that hope; we do not manufacture it. But the source dwells deeply within us and flows to us with an unstinting abundance, so much so that in fact it might be more accurate to say we dwell within it. . . .  The good news is that this deeper current does exist and you actually *can*find it. . . . For me the journey to the source of hope is ultimately a *theological* journey: up and over the mountain to the sources of hope in the headwaters of the Christian Mystery. This journey to the wellsprings of hope is not something that will change your life in the short range, in the externals. Rather, it is something that will change your innermost way of seeing. From there, inevitably, the externals will rearrange. . . .  The journey to the wellsprings of hope is really a journey toward the center, toward the innermost ground of our being where we meet and are met by God. |