

The Embers of Renewed Faith

Scriptures

Isa 43:1-12

Ps 116:11-16

1 Pet 1:13-25

Luke 24:13-35

Opening

On January 1, 2018, I learned in unforgettable fashion how ignition kindles in a pile of ashes. The day before—New Year’s Eve—I enjoyed a cozy cottage-style fire with family and friends to finish 2017. The fire created a Danish *hygge* feel that was all the rage in 2017, but slowly lost its glow through the evening. The fire looked pitiful by the time our guests went home.

The next morning I greeted the new year determined to make a good start. I began tidying up and inspected in the fireplace. Yes, the pile of ashes pass my eye test that all embers have extinguished, so I scoop them up, place them in the garbage bin, and roll it to the curb. Public safety notice: do not attempt this at home.

With said ashes in said garbage bin, I carry on with my day, preparing to meet friends around lunchtime. I go out to my car after lunch and my garbage bin resembles my chimney. It’s billowing in a way garbage bins are not meant to billow. I did not envision beginning 2018 with Rural Metro Fire Station 41, but nonetheless we did. I felt the only appropriate greeting was “Happy New Year. I’m an idiot.”

Faith in the Ashes

Our friends walking the road to Emmaus have seen the fire of their faith reduced to ashes, too. There is no spark, no burning ember that can revive their hopes. Or so they believe as they walk homeward. A stranger to their eyes, the risen Lord Jesus to all who experience this story thereafter, appears and sees hopelessness written on their faces. “What are you talking about?” he asks. Luke, our storyteller says of our friends, “And they stood still, looking sad.” The fire in their hearts has died.

The apparent cluelessness of the stranger isn’t helping. Cleopas essentially responds, “what rock have you been living under in Jerusalem? How can you not know what happened in this city?”

Imagine someone seriously asking you in the grocery store today, “hey, uh, why is everyone wearing face masks?” You would say, “You can’t be serious. We’re living through a pandemic.” If they replied, “What pandemic?” you might wonder what off-the-grid camp this person calls home.

It seems that Jesus plays dumb when he asks these questions, but our Lord Jesus doesn’t play games with his beloved. Everything our Lord Jesus does has godly purpose. He’s not playing dumb. He’s holding back. There’s a godly reason for his restraint.

Earlier that Easter day, our Lord Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene, the women at the tomb, then to the disciples. He calls them by name. He shows them his healed hands and feet. But on the Emmaus Road, he conceals himself for seven miles.

These two searching questions: “What are you talking about? What things?” require our friends to tell their story. And that is exactly what our Lord Jesus wants. He’s leading them to revelation. At the end of this road, the ashes of their faith will be kindled and they will say, “did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road?” But along this road, our Lord Jesus requires our friends to tell the story as they have lived it.

We live through so many painful experiences, not realizing what it all means, not seeing what has *really* happened in our souls. We try to carry on with life as usual. Lists and

laundry, errands and bills beckon and we live months without “listening to our lives,” as Frederick Buechner says. Writing your story in a journal; telling your story to a trusted brother or sister in Christ; this is the first step we take to find Jesus anew. Otherwise, he could well remain a stranger in your story, not its central character.

Cleopas basically says, “This is a sad tale. It does not end well.” He tells the Lord Jesus a condensed story as he experiences it; as he sees and understands it. This isn’t a personal narrative, unique to Cleopas and companion. They’re telling a centuries long story of God’s beloved family imprisoned in despair.

The cross shattered their dreams. “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” That dream died on Friday afternoon. They could only see their story from that tragic perspective.

Seeing a New Pattern in the Same, Old Story

I recall a vivid moment my junior or senior year in literature class. Our teachers introduced the literary devices of symbolism, recurring images, and metaphors in stories for the first time. Until now, we just enjoyed reading stories with a good beginning, middle, and end. Now our teacher tells us that Dickens, Hawthorne, and Fitzgerald . A heavy wooden door, a distant green light, Marley’s chains—these images didn’t just create atmosphere. Symbols carried a deeper meaning than the plot events, a story within a story. We had to learn how to read symbols now. We left crestfallen. We couldn’t see it. We knew the story, loved the story, but didn’t perceive what held it all together. It was hidden in plain sight. Our world ended in a way, but then it got better. A week or so later and the lights came on for everyone. Every story, every play, every novel would never look the same.

Cleopas and companion cannot recognize the death and resurrection pattern woven into their story. Not just the story of the past three days or the past three years with Jesus of Nazareth. But the story that reaches back to our first parents walking east of Eden into a world now cursed with death. The Lord God announced the curse of death on the bodies of Adam and Eve, but they did not die in that moment. After the curse of death came the promise of new life, first Cain, then Abel. The tragic pattern of death repeats with Cain. But

then Seth is born to Adam and Eve and from Seth's line Noah is born, who carries his family and God's beloved animals through the death and resurrection of a creation gone wrong.

Cleopas has told the Stranger a story in crisis. But the story has *always* been in crisis. That's the crux of this story. Isaac is born from Abraham and Sarah's crisis. Joseph is thrown into a Canaanite pit, then into Egyptian prison—twice. Then he rises to a seat of glory and power.

Down again into crisis and death the story turns when Pharaoh imprisons Israel. Then the Lord God raises his people up, saving them through water, leading them to a Promised Land, a new Eden.

Time forbids me to tell the crisis of death that Naomi knew and then the most improbable resurrection she witnessed through Ruth and Boaz. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern like Joseph before him and our Lord Jesus after him. Again and again in this story, our heroes are thrown into pits. Yet the death-resurrection pattern persists throughout this saga: the anointed ones must suffer, but from age to age God shows his power to throw death into reverse.

All those stories, all those mini-narratives of death and resurrection, were prologue to the event Cleopas and his companion witnessed. All those stories were braided together in the crown of thorns Jesus wore on Friday afternoon.

But they were also woven into the linen grave clothes that our Lord Jesus folded and left in the empty tomb. Cleopas and companion have heard the rumors he might be alive and the more this Stranger tells the same story with new vision, the dying embers of their faith are beginning to burn again.

The Pattern of Our Stories

Death and resurrection are woven into the fabric of our world. When I meet with families to prepare a funeral service for a departed saint, I've ceased being surprised to learn a grandchild or a great-grandchild will soon be or has recently been born. In our garden, our irises have overcome another winter's death, blooming again this week with color in the

Tennessee springtime. We cannot gather in this time of quarantine, yet we still we say, "Alleluia. The Lord is risen indeed."

Eastertide gives us days to walk the Emmaus Road of our lives with the risen Lord Jesus. And this year we have more time on our hands now than maybe we ever will. It's a season to see our story anew. We cannot escape the suffering in our stories even if we tried. But Lord Jesus Christ, give me eyes to see the power of your resurrection where I've been blind. I want to see my past in light of your death and resurrection; I want to enter the future taking up my cross and believing your resurrection power for my life.

Story and Sacrament

The Emmaus Road story doesn't conclude in words. When the story comes home, the story becomes sacrament. We have all lived stories where words cannot convey the depths of your experience. I remember reading the final sentence in Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*. "Grace is everywhere" the hero speaks. I closed the back cover and sat in silence. You've had that experience finishing a story that moves you. The story washes over you and the words recede in the background. You want to digest the story in your soul. You want to eat, to consume this truth in your soul.

So our Lord Jesus, after the story has been told, after all has been said that needs to be said, took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to our friends. Their burning hearts on the Emmaus Road becomes a new fire at home with the Lord Jesus.

Then the Lord suddenly vanishes. Yes, his sudden disappearance creates an ache for his presence. But there is not a void in his presence. The risen Lord Jesus will be present every time they tell the old story made new. The risen Lord Jesus will be present every time the bread is broken with brothers and sisters who believe his resurrection, who profess him as Lord of all, who exclaim "Alleluia. The Lord is risen indeed. He is here. And He is coming again. Amen."