

Isaiah 25:6-10
Luke 24:28-35
Text: Luke 24:30-31

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TIME TRAVEL

It is a captivating story: two men trudging home to Emmaus, their spirits as dark as the grave after Jesus' death, their minds slammed shut to the silly prattle of the women about an angel and an empty tomb. Death is death! Right? So with hearts cast down they head for home, oblivious to the stranger materializing at their side. Meanwhile, Luke lets the reader in on the identity of this mysterious companion.

Luke's layering of the story over rich veins of truth is as masterful as ever. The travelers' weariness breathes despondency. Their dullness of heart, the forgotten teachings, the crushing sense of loss at Jesus' death that shattered their hope, all bludgeon the senses. Here is a picture of faith wading through the quicksand of crisis, simply unable to see beyond the moment.

Still, one wonders how these men, so recently in his company, could fail to recognize him "on the road," that is, in the unexpected commonplace. How could anyone fail to see who had even the mildest encounter with the Son of God? How does anyone fail to see anything that is right before their eyes? How difficult faith can be in these times when corruption is so easily embraced by the powerful, and innocent civilians laughing together in a coffee shop, or absently fondling fruit and vegetables in the market place, or waiting for a child by the school gate, are ripped limb from limb by the hideous detonation of a bomb. How difficult to grasp fully who Jesus is across the centuries, the compassion and the legitimate power of him. Something is needed to bridge the distance, a distance in faith exacerbated by time: a sort of time travel without ever leaving home.

Last night I picked Jane up from the airport after she spent a week helping her Mom through a difficult health crisis. One particular joy, she told me, was going through her father's old trunk (her dad died in the early 1980s). One of Jane's fondest recollections as a child was going back frequently to St. Paul's, North Carolina, a small town in the coastal plain where most of her close relatives still lived on the same street, just a stone's throw from St. Paul's Presbyterian Church. The family home was just a couple of miles out of town. I've been there

many times. It's a rambling wood framed farm house of native pine, wood with an almost golden grain as hard as live oak, and it's set back off the road on bleached and sandy soil in a pecan grove, with Spanish moss filtering the dank and listless air, and tree crickets sawing into the dead of night. And in the air is the heady smell of long leaf pine and honeysuckle, and the way the warm wet earth exhales after a southern thunder storm.

After supper, Jane and her brother, Duncan, beside themselves to be excused, would race outside, down the worn back steps, the screen door clacking like a pistol shot behind them. And they'd climb trees or shoot at cans with a Beebe gun from the loft of the barn. They knew every path and inch of those pine forests around the farm, and when they'd stumble across some unidentifiable bit of metal or stone in a desolate place they'd let their imaginations loose and give the treasure its own story. Then Jane and Duncan would come bounding breathless with their stories back up the steps of the front porch, to the swinging seat and the rocking chairs and the clinking chime of ice as the grown-ups sipped homemade iced tea and lemonade. And in the half light their tales would tumble out to their receptive if slyly winking elders. And then, Jane said, sometimes there would be grandmother's home churned, hand turned peach ice cream with chewy clumps of semi-frozen peach, and the cream as soft and orange-pink as evening in a southern sky.

It was when Jane mentioned that ice cream that I saw something take hold of her. It wasn't unusual, really. We've all seen it when we've watched someone travel back into the heart, the living soul of memory. It wasn't that she went back to that time, but that she brought that moment, the savor of it, the living vital presence of it into the present. It was, I suspect, as pure a moment of time travel as we can encounter, and I felt in the quick of the moment with her. It was very powerful and real, a whole world of experience come to life, and then it fell easily away, as such moments do.

Something like that happened in another private home two thousand years ago when two despondent travelers sat down with an invited stranger to a simple meal. I had always imagined that the shock of recognition that broke through to them that night came when Jesus broke bread and they saw the marks, those still raw wounds in his hands. Perhaps. But I wonder if it wasn't something else, too, because in the Jewish tradition when one speaks of "breaking bread" one does not mean simply the act of tearing bread but the meal itself—the act of fellowship. Surely it was a more vital sense than merely seeing that stirred their sleeping memories. Perhaps it was the taste and feel of bread newly broken that brought the rush of recollection. Then it was gone, but not before it burned an image on their souls in a flash of insight—all from the associative images of the taste and touch of bread.

Our daughter Carolyn, a psychology major when in college, once told me that the reason taste is so incredibly evocative, the reason it brings the past into the present with such a rush of remembering, is because the locus of taste in the brain is closest of all the senses to the locus of memory. The two are next door neighbors.

So here we are back at the question we posed earlier. What can build a bridge and bring Jesus into the present with us? Do you recall what Jesus said at the inauguration of this meal, the last supper, in the breaking of bread? He said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Here is bread, symbol of the world’s essential sustenance. Bread that sustains life; bread that is transformed, the life—the essence of it—ground out on the millstone, the chaff, the spent part of it, cast away. “I am the bread of life,” said Jesus. “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good,” invited the psalmist. Here in the product of this grain that must fall to the earth and die in order to bring forth a harvest of good, are emblems of Christ and his self-giving for our salvation. Here is the blood of the grape, crushed out, transformed—in wine changed, quite literally, by a presence not its own. “This is my blood,” said the resurrected one, “poured out for you”—poured into you.

One does not eat and drink of these things like popcorn and soda in front of the TV. We are to stir the memory with these things, as any table richly spread provokes memories, associations, and brings the past like a flood into the present. Here, in these representative things, we are to let Christ speak of himself—who he is and what he has done—so that the distance can be overcome.

One can hardly taste a good thing again after years of absence from it without a rush of association: a water ice, a ballpark frank, a child’s candy, a homemade desert. Jesus knew well how to link the searching, sensate mind to ultimate things. And so he took bread, and when he had blest it and given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body... this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me.”

Amen.