

The worst day of our lives?

Emmaus

Luke 24: 13-35*

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Can you name the worst day of your life?

I'm Irish so I resist saying and naming aloud any such thing, out of unsubstantiated fear that another even less pleasant day than the one I have in mind one will replace it. But setting aside my unfounded fears—can you name the worst day of your life? (Pause.)

What I remember of my worst day was an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and inadequacy with an abiding sense of fear and sadness layered on top of it. It was clear to me that I had no sense of agency because there was nothing I could do to alter the events or the circumstances in which I found myself. If it had been possible to disappear, to do nothing and to look at no one than that's what I would have done: curled up in a corner and sucked my thumb.

I think they might have felt a bit like that. They were headed out of town. Pilgrims in town for the Passover holy days, followers of Jesus of Nazareth, they are now headed out of town after what can only be described as the worst three days of their lives.

They are leaving Jerusalem. It was not going to turn out as they thought it might. He was not what or who they thought he was going to be. He was dead. Worse than dead he'd been betrayed by the religious authorities and executed by the Romans. He was dead, killed by extremely efficient systems that loathed loose ends. He was dead and there was every possibility of others who had been close to him would be joining him.

They are two of the disciples, they are not of the inner twelve, but still close enough to have been connected to the twelve, now the eleven. They are leaving Jerusalem. One is named Cleopas, the other we do not know. What we do know is that (as many do having experienced trauma,) they are replaying the incidents and events of the weekend. Going over it with each other, clear about the details, fixed in their minds, walking and talking.

They are lost in their stories and their experiences of his death. I doubt very seriously if they are taking in their surroundings at all as they walk, so absorbed are they in the experiences they relate to one another.

As they walk and talk, another joins them. The stranger no doubt having overheard them for some time, the stranger asks them, "Exactly what **are** you talking about?" They come to a full stop. They close their mouths, still their arms and look at him— "Are you seriously

the only visitor in the city of Jerusalem who does not know what has happened these last few days?”

What goes unsaid, but would have been intuited by anyone with a pulse, is the unasked question of “And exactly what rock my friend did you crawl out from under?”

They pause and look at him. Is it this stranger’s seeming lack of information that stops them or, is it the “burning bush phenomena?” Holiness, albeit unexplained, has come close, so whether they are conscious of it or not, they stop. Theologian Cynthia Jarvis says, “When God enters a conversation we are brought to a standstill.” (p 421, Feasting on the Word.)

After their pause, Cleopas explains to the stranger, “We are speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, His words were powerful his deeds remarkable, the people recognized him as a prophet. But our chief priests handed him over and they crucified him. We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel. Now he’s dead—what’s more some of the women, who followed him closely, went to his tomb this morning and found it empty, his body gone. They report visions of angels and that he is alive.”

It is then, that the stranger speaks and they listen. It is then that the stranger offers them a new way of looking at the worst three days of their lives. It is then that the stranger lays out, why it might be that everything that happened fits in with the law and the prophets all that had been predicted in scripture since the time of Moses.

They stopped and listened.

On the worst day of their lives, they stopped, listened and engaged with someone else. As they walk again, now it’s not trauma that they replay, but an alternate vision for what it all might mean.

They walk and listen, and then they find themselves now at their destination, filled with a sense of who Jesus might be.

They step beyond themselves one more time—beyond their cares and fears and invite the stranger in—there at dinner—

He takes the bread, he blesses it, he breaks it, gives it to them—and they take the final step away out of the corner of despair and their eyes are opened. There he is the risen one—in their midst—then gone. But that glimpse is enough.

The burning bush—a sense of hallowed ground and holiness—is palpable now. They say, “Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked.”

Immediately, the two who were so desperate to leave Jerusalem run through the night—the full moon lit night—to tell their friends—He is alive. They run back to Jerusalem. On the worst day of their lives, their hearts now burn bright.

On the worst day of my life, I remember several people sat with me, though I could barely tolerate their presence. They offered few words—but what they said was insightful. Then another person called and gave me a task—get on down to the hospital, go take my friend and go be with the man for whom I was so worried.

What I remember so clearly of the worst day of my life, are the ones, who gently nudged me away from my corner of despair, away from just myself. And somehow because perhaps my heart was burning, somehow, I moved beyond myself and accepted their help.

So it is with resurrection, both great and small, literal, and metaphorical, God comes into our life, unbidden, sometimes unknown, promising a world where neither despair nor death are the final answers.

Envisioning a world, where the worst days of our lives, can become better.

Alleluia Christ is Risen.

The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia.