

THE THIRD MAN

Pilgrim Church, Duluth Easter Sunday, April 14, 1974 Dr. Royal Shepard

Luke 24:15 (Phillips).

While they were absorbed in their serious talk and discussion,
Jesus himself approached and walked along with them.

When I was a boy I occasionally worshiped in a tiny Episcopal church located in a poor village among the hills of New York's Hudson Valley. It was called the Church of the Resurrection. The vicar was an elderly Swedish man whom we knew as Mr. Lundgren. He did the best he could with very limited physical resources. There were no Tiffany windows there like those that grace the lake side of this room. But Mr. Lundgren painted the little plain glass windows himself. I remember bright toadstools, leafy vines, butterflies and birds, all leaping up out of the ground.

Behind the altar hung a picture that was also Mr. Lundgren's work. It was a scene often depicted in art. Rembrandt drew it several times. It was the supper at Emmaus, Jesus sitting at a table with the two disciples whom we meet in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke. Mr. Lundgren was no Rembrandt. But his white-robed Christ dominated that little room which was hardly as large as our chapel upstairs. His presence defined the meaning of our life in that room. You knew he was the life, the truth and the way.

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It is only seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Just an easy afternoon's stroll for people used to going about by the means of locomotion with which they are naturally endowed. But seven miles can be a tiresome piece of road for a man to walk alone, especially when he is in a depressed state of mind.

Cleopas is depressed. But he will not be alone. We see him now, one man walking down the road, about to pass through the city wall. But there under the arch of the gate we observe a second man stepping out of the shadows to join him. The other man's motions are stealthy, and his greeting is hushed. As the two men pass out of the city together toward the west, their pace accelerates and they do not look back. They give us the feeling that they are afraid of something back there in Jerusalem. Once when they round the bend and become invisible to anyone standing on the city wall, do the two men begin to relax and to talk.

There are two men going down the road now and that is significant. Time was when Cleopas might have walked down that road all by himself. But his life was touched by another, and whoever was touched by that other's life was brought into community. You did not follow that prophet from Galilee alone. You went with him as part of a fellowship. Even now when that prophet seems so out of touch, they are brought together by his impact on their lives. Once they shared a common hope. Now they are bound by a common sense of tragedy.

The problem is to make sense of it all.

Here were the ingredients of the puzzle:

Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet in what he did and in what he said
who
kindled ancient hope yet gave that hope a strange twist
who
inspired intense devotion yet was betrayed by one of his closest
associates.
who
rode into the city as a king and staggered out as a condemned criminal
who
made splendid promises yet died ignominiously
add to all this - a story told this morning that somehow he lived again.

What sense could one make of all of this? Cleopas and his fellow traveler were not the only ones to ask this question. About a hundred and fifty years later a pagan philosopher named Celsus became annoyed at the increasing interest people were taking in that prophet from Nazareth. He read the same scriptures as the Christians possessed, but he came to this conclusion:

"Jesus, having gathered around him ten or eleven persons of notorious character, the very wickedest of tax-collectors and sailors, fled in company with them from place to place, and obtained his living in a shameful and importunate manner."

There is just enough truth in that interpretation to make it an effective bit of character assassination. The same is true of Celsus' remark that Jesus promised the kingdom to those who were stupid, childish and sinful and his assertion that the whole resurrection event rested on the hysterical testimony of a group of frantic women. Modern day propagandists have nothing on Celsus.

Celsus described the picture of Jesus' life as he saw it. But so much depends on how you look at the picture. Perhaps you recall seeing one of those trick pictures which have a way of rearranging themselves before your eyes. For example, there is an old picture called Vanity. It shows a beautiful woman making herself up at a dressing table. But if you look at that picture for a while, the pattern changes and suddenly you see in the dressing table mirror the outline of a skull.

An old picture of the same type is called Gossip. It shows elderly ladies with their heads close together drinking tea. Again as you concentrate on the picture, the configuration of lines seems to change. Suddenly you behold a pair of silly-looking donkeys.

Now nothing changes in the composition of those two pictures. Precisely the same arrangement of light and shade, of line and open space is there all along. What changes is the shape of your own perception, the way in which you the observer, select out details and put them together.

So much depends on how you look at the picture. This is a point that the renowned British philosopher, John Wisdom, made with regard to the problem of the reality of God. It is not so much the facts as the patterns of perception that matter.

But when it came to looking at the picture, those two men walking down the road to Emmaus were in a quandary. They couldn't find a meaningful pattern in the picture no matter how they looked at it. They tried. They conducted an incessant post mortem of recent events as they walked along. But all they could see in the picture was hate, cruelty, suffering, death, defeat and despair.

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But now a new factor enters in to our own picture of that journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. There is still another figure walking down the road. How did that other fellow get in there? The record does not say. We may regard him as an apparition, or a spiritual presence symbolically portrayed, or simply as a sudden flash of insight. But there he is.

"Jesus himself approached and walked along with them."

He wants to know what Cleopas and his companion are talking about with so much intensity.

Well, that is a surprise. This strange ignorance draws the two men out of themselves.

"They stopped, their faces drawn with misery..."
It seems this stranger is unaccountably unaware of what's been going on.
"Haven't you heard all the things that happened recently?"

"What things?"

So they are forced to go over the whole affair again from the very beginning. They must face again all the brutal facts. They try to set the third man straight, but when they are finished with their story, he calls them "stupid" and "slow to believe." "Was it not inevitable that Christ should suffer like that and so find his glory?"

Well, the man has some nerve. But Cleopas and his companion are too dejected to feel much anger. So they let the man talk.

"Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them..."

And now is when that remarkable thing happens. The whole picture rearranges itself before their eyes. The details remain the same. Not one fact is altered. But a new pattern emerges. No longer is the picture merely that of a deluded young man who goes to a sordid death. Now it becomes a sublime portrait of God's compassion. No longer is the picture a commentary on the futility of human hopes. Now it is the revelation of a more than human victory.

The three men walk on into the sunset. At last they come to the poor village of Emmaus, situated among the western hills. The third man is invited to stay overnight with the others. They still don't know who he is. But they do know what he has done for them. He has given them a new per-

spective on the prophet, a new perspective, indeed, on all of history, a new perspective on themselves. Their hearts are burning within them.

So they sit down to supper. It is the third man, who so obviously bears the truth, who is asked to say the blessing.

"Then it happened!" says Luke. "Then it happened! While he was sitting at table with them he took the loaf, gave thanks, broke it and passed it to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew him!"

He vanished then. But only in a certain sense. The point is that ever since that Sunday many centuries ago there has been a third man walking down the road. Wherever there are two or more together who share his hope and grieve at his tragedy and still look for his triumph, he goes along with his truth and his love. And always he makes people look at the picture in a new way. Sometimes people find him joining them at sunrise; sometimes they do not perceive his unobtrusive step until the day is far spent. But he is walking down that road, down all the roads of the world where people are going in search of meaning for their lives.

Haven't you heard his footfall coming up behind you as you journeyed down the road? Haven't you heard?

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When I was no longer a small boy I went again to see the church of the resurrection in the village of Hopewell Junction. The painted toadstools had largely chipped away from the little windows. Behind the altar hung a curtain; the current priest preferred it to the distraction of an inferior work of art. But behind the curtain was a surprise. There in the darkness, hidden from the congregation, between the curtain and the wall, the three men still sat around the table at Emmaus. And I fancied I saw with them still another, an old Swedish man who wasn't much of an artist, but did the best he could to celebrate the life of toadstools and butterflies, who once informed us boys that fishing was a cruel hardship on the tender earthworm, who passed the chalice down the little rail there with great awe, speaking in whispers of the new life that entered the world on Easter Day.