

Mindful Joy

3rd Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2020

Foreword

In the old days, my mother told me, they used to tell great stories on the radio. Mystery stories. And families used to all sit around the radio, just listening. And, according to my mom, "you could hear a pin drop." I remembered that as I was preparing this morning's sermon – probably because we're all at home, sitting around our computers (or iPads, or cellphones), but also because today's gospel reading is from Luke, the best storyteller of all the gospel writers (I think). And the one with the best command of Greek language and its literary styles & patterns. Luke wasn't just a reporter of the "hard facts" alone. He saw the threads *between* the facts, that wove them all together, and revealed the "tension" between them – like a good mystery novel does. But Luke's Easter story is not a "who done it?" kind of mystery – that searches for the hidden "bad guy." It's more of a "what's going on here?" kind of mystery, that searches through the struggles of the characters – which seem to just come out of nowhere – to find the secret, hidden "problem" that lies beneath them all. The "real" problem that points to the real solution.

When we're accustomed to reading scripture by following the artificial divisions of numbered verses & chapters, it's harder to see this, but Luke carefully crafted his Easter story into three beautifully inter-connected parts:

- a Beginning (where we get to know the characters and get a "taste" of the conflict between them);
- a Middle (where the heart of the conflict rises to its peak and becomes clear – *at least to us*); and
- an End (where the characters – either fail to see what's really going on, so that the conflict gets worse and ends in tragedy – or, in the case of today's story, the characters' eyes are opened, and the conflict gets resolved – *at least for now...*)

So let's listen to how Luke makes his story unfold.

The Beginning

As Luke tells the story of Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, together with a group of other women, went early to the tomb, bringing burial spices that they had prepared for Jesus' body. When they arrived, the stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled away. And when they entered, the body was gone. As they stood there, perplexed, they had a *vision* — an apparition of two angels dressed in robes as bright as lightning, stood before them and asked: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen..." And then, the angels in their vision reminded them of a *crucial detail* that they had somehow "forgotten." They reminded them of how Jesus had already told them that — *although he was innocent — because he was the Messiah* — it was necessary for him to both die a dishonourable death on a cross, and (in three days) to be gloriously raised up. The crucial detail they'd forgotten was that *both* the Cross *and* the Glory were essential for the Messiah. Both the *descending* (down to the realm of the dead), and the *being raised* (up & out of it.)

The angels were "bringing back" to their minds the strange "double-message" of Jesus that (as we saw over & over again in Holy Week) had always put his followers into a great "mental bind." But, sadly, the "bind" was inevitable. Because in the minds of his disciples, the message of the Messiah's Cross completely "cancelled out" the message of the Messiah's Glory (and with it, their own hope of glory.) Like a "debit" cancels out a "credit" in a bank account, leaving only "lack" in its place. So it didn't matter that, on their way down to Jerusalem, *each time* Christ had spoken to them of the tragedy of his crucifixion, *he had also* told them of the glory of his resurrection. It didn't matter because they had only attended & responded to the "Cross part" of the message. They couldn't hear or see the "Glory part." It went in one ear & out the other, because once they'd heard about the Cross, any hope of Glory seemed like utter nonsense.

But that Easter morning.... when the angels reminded Mary Magdalene and her companions of the *full* message they had received from Jesus, they all remembered how Jesus had indeed told them of both his Cross *and* his Glory, both his Death *and* his Resurrection. And suddenly, for these women, "the penny dropped". So they went back & joyfully told it all to the 11 apostles and the other disciples with them, and confessed that they had come to believe that Christ had risen from the dead.

But... Luke tells us – when the apostles and other disciples heard the women's story – "their words appeared to them as foolish." The word Luke uses here that is translated as "foolish" actually means "nonsense" or "jibberish" in the original language ("ἄρηρος"). So, thinking that these women were just "talking nonsense," the apostles & other disciples dismissed their message.

Except for Peter — who at once got up & ran out to look for Jesus. Perhaps another important sign of what we explored on Easter Sunday — that a new, *Christlike* kind of conscience was being formed within Peter — one that (in this situation) wasn't "putting him to shame" for listening to, hearing, trusting, and acting on the words of these women.

On the contrary, Peter was able to respect them and hear the *wisdom* in their words (*even when all of "the other guys" around him were discrediting them & hearing nothing but nonsense.*)

This is the end of "*The Beginning*" part – the *prologue* – of Luke's Easter story. He's introduced us to the key characters and given us a "taste" of the conflict between them. It's a "church conflict" – between two groups of disciples. On the one side, we have Mary Magdalene & her friends (*who believed their vision of Christ as both crucified & risen*). On the other side, we have the apostles & their friends (*who dismissed the women's vision as nonsense*). And *Peter* is out on his own somewhere, trusting the vision given to the women, and looking for Jesus.

So now, we've arrived at "The Middle" part of Luke's story, where we'll see the conflict rise to a peak, and it's true nature will be revealed.

The Middle

Later, on that same Easter Sunday, Luke tells us that two of the disciples — who had heard the women's words & dismissed them as "nonsense" — were walking from the Holy City (Jerusalem) to the small village of Emmaus. And, on their way, they meet "a stranger" who joins them in their walk. At least, he was a stranger "to them." Luke tells us (so that *we'll* know, even though they don't) that the 'stranger' was actually Jesus, but that their "eyes" were not open wide enough to recognize him. So there they were, walking down the road together. And "*Unrecognized Jesus*" — like a good travel companion, wants to join them in their conversation. So he asks what they've been talking about that has them looking so dismal. And the two start sharing with him their understanding of "the sad story of Jesus," and their own sad place within it:

He was a great prophet, mighty in word & deed. He had been their hero — the one they'd hoped would redeem Israel. But, now, all their hopes were lost. For, three days ago, their leaders & chief priests had handed him over to be condemned, and he was crucified. And, to make matters worse, when three days had passed, some women among them had gone to his tomb, and — when they couldn't find his body — came back with a story of "an apparition of angels" who had told them Jesus was alive. We confirmed that the tomb was empty — but certainly didn't see Jesus alive — as these women had proclaimed he was. Their "silly talk" only stirred up false hopes & made his death "sting" all the more for us.

And *that was it*. That was their gloomy "mystery of faith" —

- "Christ gave us hope."
- "Christ has died."
- "And our hope died with him."

(And anyone who tells us otherwise is just talking nonsense that'll only wound us further!)

Now *THAT* is the story of a very closed & very dark state of mind — *way beyond the pale* of healthy grief. How could you contribute *anything* to such a dark, dead-end conversation? Well, the still-unrecognized Jesus takes in their story of his life and their place in it. And it's important to notice what Jesus does *not* do. He doesn't respond as people often do in such situations.

He doesn't just walk away (as we sometimes need to do), repelled by their dark doom & gloom and fearing he'll be contaminated by it. Knowing their hearts, he sees a readiness for their minds to change, and stays in the conversation. But there's another thing he *doesn't* do. Although he stays engaged, he doesn't "*support*" them in their misery by maligning the ones whom they believe are to blame for their suffering — their corrupt leaders & chief priests — their Roman oppressors — their supposed "hero" who hadn't even fought back — or "*those women*" whose "*nonsense*" had given them false hope. He doesn't affirm any of things, because he sees that they are experiencing the kind of misery that "loves company" — company that will affirm that they were wholly in the *right*, and that everyone else involved was wholly in the *wrong*. Company that would at least "cheer them up" by giving them a sense of their own moral superiority in this awful situation. But Jesus is clearly not out to fill them with that sort of "good cheer." On the contrary, he is out to "wake them up" to what is really happening in their lives, which they are missing. And so, perhaps to our shock, the first thing that Jesus — God's Great Gift of Love — says to them is: "*Oh, how foolish you are...*"

And here again, our English translation fails to capture the subtlety of Luke's Greek, and almost spoils the story. This time, the word that Luke uses (which is translated here as "foolish") doesn't mean "*nonsense*" — like the word the apostles & other disciples had used to describe the message of Mary & her companions. Jesus is not dismissing the conversation of these two disciples as jibberish that's not worth listening to. He had listened very carefully indeed. Instead, the word Luke puts in the mouth of Jesus here... actually means "*mindless*" ("ἀνόητος"). It doesn't mean *literally* "without a mind" — they clearly have minds. But their minds are not operating at full capacity. They're not fully "*there*." Spiritually, their minds are ½ asleep — and so they're not fully aware of, not fully understanding, what was actually going on with the Messiah, or within their own lives. By telling them that they are "mindless," Jesus is not insulting them (like the English translation "foolish" makes it sound.) Instead, he is pointing out – diagnosing – for them their real problem, the real source of their misery. It wasn't all the ones they blamed, including themselves and God. It was the "mindless mind" — the mind so "tired out" from wrestling with a conflict it can't resolve – that it just disposes of the parts it doesn't understand as "nonsense," so it can relax and get some rest. The mind is still there; it's just asleep, or mindless, toward everything it can't grasp.

There is a kind of peace in being only ½ awake like this. A peace that seems to make life clearer & simpler. But it's more like the peace of anesthesia than genuine peace. It doesn't actually clarify anything; it just makes us numb to the things we don't understand -- as though they're not there at all.

This wasn't something new, though. It was the very same problem the disciples had from the very beginning. Their minds couldn't bear to see or hear the full, "double message" of Jesus' gospel. So they cut it in two -- clung to the ½ that made sense to them -- disposed of the other ½ as nonsense -- and followed Jesus as best they could (*with their minds ½ asleep*.) It was the "mindless" minds of the disciples that, before his death, could only see the *upside* of his *Glory* — and dismissed his Cross as "nonsense." It was the same "½ asleep" minds that, after his death, could only see the *downside* of his *Cross* — and dismissed his *Glory* as "nonsense." Minds that lacked the openness — the readiness of heart — to take in "the whole package," which Jesus had presented them with over & over again. It wasn't a lack of intelligence, or of education, that was making their minds "only ½ there." It was fear. Fear of losing Jesus, fear of losing themselves, fear of losing all they loved forever.

This is the end of "The Middle" part of Luke's Easter story — the high peak, or climax, where the true nature of the disciples' problem and its cause gets revealed to us, before they could see it themselves. Luke has shown us *why they could not recognize* the Living Christ, even though he was standing right in front of them. It is because, spiritually, their *minds* were ½ asleep. And so, now, the big questions become — "*Can they, will they, wake up in the end? And if so... how?*"

The End

Now, in "The End" part of the story, the action starts moving rapidly down from the peak to the finale. Jesus *begins* waking them up by giving them perhaps the longest "Liturgy of the Word" in history. As they walk along, he guides them through all the Books of Moses, and all the writings of the prophets. But it may not have actually taken *that* long, since he only focuses on the teachings about the Messiah. *Both* the bright & glorious ones (which they were likely quite familiar with & thought they understood), *and* the dark & tragic ones (which fear made harder to decipher & integrate). He shows them how the "*Cross*" *parts* & the "*Glory*" *parts* fit together into one integral whole — and how this "*whole story*" of the Messiah got fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. It's just "*the long version*" of the same "double-message" of death & resurrection which Mary Magdalene & her friends had come to believe — but which, except for Peter, all the other disciples — *including these two* — had dismissed as nonsense.

This time around, though, as Jesus *opened up their minds to understand* the scriptures, their *hearts* were "*burning within them*." But, *still*, they did not recognize him. And, by then, they'd arrived at their destination, the village of Emmaus. And so they stopped. But Jesus just kept on walking, as though he had other places to be. For just a moment, Luke is leading us to wonder — *Would this be the end for these disciples — whose minds were "almost" focused on the task at hand — "almost" on the edge of waking up? Would they just let Jesus walk away?* But (fortunately) night was starting to fall — a good pretext for urging him to stay (*without getting all "mushy" about it*.) And so they urged, and knowing their hearts, Jesus again stayed with them. And then, in a flash, comes the great finale. The final conclusion — where all the loose ends come together — for better or for worse — either in a deeper *ignorance* in the characters that will make their problem even worse — or in a *revelation* that will resolve it.

Jesus had already given them his long Liturgy of the Word. And now, simply sitting at the table with them — without any *pomp & circumstance* — he *re-enacts* the Last Supper, the First Eucharist. He takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. And he gives it to them in love. And suddenly, they wake up. Their eyes & ears & minds & hearts are opened. They recognize that "*the stranger*" is the Living Christ. It took a manifestation of Christ's love *for them personally* — offering them himself — the Bread of Life — to free their minds from fear — enough to wake up from their mindlessness and take in the double-message of the gospel: *That he had died for them, and was alive for them, were parts of the same, single gift of love.*

Then Jesus, now vibrantly alive within their hearts & minds, vanishes from their sight. And for them, the end of their story becomes a fresh, new beginning. Even though their minds will surely "fall asleep" again -- and maybe often — they've learned the secret of waking up.

But, we're not quite ready for the "Amen." Wouldn't you know that just when Luke's story seems to be all wrapped up and tied with a bow, the last lines of today's passage insert a final "twist" that takes us back to the very beginning — to see it in a different light. Don't worry, we'll skip quickly forward to the "Amen." But if you're curious about the "twist", check out the written copy of this morning's sermon that we'll post for you in just a few minutes.

The joy of Easter is a mindful joy, far beyond the joys of sugared bunnies & chocolate eggs. Even beyond the fervour of shouting "Christ is risen indeed!"

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit lead us all to become — and keep becoming — a mindful, joyful Easter people. Amen.

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Afterward

In the last lines of his Emmaus story, Luke inserts a final twist that brings us “full circle.” Just as in the beginning, Mary Magdalene & her friends, after receiving their vision, went back and told the apostles about it — these two disciples leave Emmaus & go back to Jerusalem to do the same. But when they arrive, they can't report their good news right away, because the apostles and their friends are already speaking, saying that *Peter* has reported seeing Jesus. And this time, they're not saying “*it's all nonsense*” as they'd said earlier of the women's vision. Instead, they're shouting, “*The Lord has risen indeed!*”

There is actually no account in any of the gospels that *describes* this encounter between Peter & Jesus. And there is no account of Peter *himself* saying that it happened. There is only Luke's statement that “*they said, that he said*” it happened. And that they believed. The fervour of their reception certainly *downplayed* the two disciples' report of what they'd just experienced on their trip to Emmaus — *down* to a single sentence. So what is Luke up to here? Why does he close his Emmaus story with such an odd twist? Perhaps he is leaving us with a set of important *contrasts* to mull over.

There is the more obvious contrast between how the report attributed to *Peter* is received with celebration — and how the report of *Mary* is dismissed without ceremony. Perhaps in the sharpness of that contrast, Luke is leading us to question why *some* witnesses are seen as credible, while *others* are not. (*Incidentally, John's Easter story makes this question even more pointed, because John describes Mary's vision as including her seeing, touching, and conversing with Jesus directly.*)

But there is also a more subtle contrast in Luke's closing words. The contrast between the hearts & minds of the two “*Emmaus disciples,*” gently awakened & set ablaze — and the loud fervour of the apostles & other disciples, shouting “*The Lord has risen indeed!*” because Peter had said so. (*It's not that unlike modern forms of believing because the Bible – or the Church – has said so.*) Perhaps in this contrast, Luke is leading us to question whether there is more than just one *kind* of “*believing in the resurrection,*” and whether some kinds are better than others.

Luke provides answers to questions like these in his next story, but the answers are very mysterious. There, Jesus appears to all the apostles and gives them his “*great commission*” (*but cautions them to wait on the Gift of the Holy Spirit before taking it up*). And then he ascends “*back home*” to his place at the right hand of the Father (where his disciples, within their minds, are called to abide with him.) Now that's mysterious! But even there we find the lesson of Emmaus – that we can't simply “*grasp*” a mystery. We can come to understand and trust in its truth – through ongoing spiritual encounters with Christ — listening to his “*still small voice*” within us – that frees us from our fears — and wakes up our hearts & minds — to see truths that just (as *Father Shaun said last Sunday*) make no obvious sense – but can take us to holy places that are “*out of this world,*” without our feet ever leaving the ground.

So is there a simple “take home” message in all of this?

Sometimes in modern plays, after the final scene, the author comes out on stage to say a few words about his or her work that the audience just witnessed, and to hear how they are responding to it. Luke doesn't do that in today's story. But if he did, I imagine he would say something like this:

“I hope that you enjoyed the story and found it interesting. If you did, that is fine. But if you didn't, that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Whether you loved it, or hated it, or a mixture of the two, what matters most is – did see yourself in the story? Perhaps in Peter, or in Mary, or in the disciples who dismissed the mystery as nonsense? Perhaps in the two whose minds were gradually waking up, or in Jesus working patiently & compassionately to help them? I realize that answering questions like these takes time & reflection, listening to that “still, small voice” in the back of your mind. But if you can find yourself somewhere in the story, it may become something much more than just enjoyable or interesting. It may actually become helpful for you in your life. It's only when that happens that it becomes truly valuable.”

It's a “take home” message that is simple, but it's open-ended. It's left for us to figure out personally, within our own lives. For me, when I read through Luke's story, I find that I see myself most in the two sleepy-minded disciples who are gradually waking up to the presence of Christ in their lives. It helps me recognize that there are times in my life (*more than I like to admit*) when I can become so mindless & unresponsive that I must seem “*like a block of wood.*” But, better still, it helps me realize that — when I am “*lost*” in such a mindless state — Jesus isn't belittling me — isn't calling me “*stupid*” or a “*fool*” (*like some might, or I myself might.*) Instead, Christ is speaking a restorative word to me that penetrates my cloudiness — “*waking me up*” to his presence in the here & now of my situation — and helping me get reoriented. When I cooperate with his Spirit in times like these, I experience a mindful joy that dispells my inner struggles and my cloudiness.

It is very “*enlightening,*” but I find it's not always easy to bear. Because it's very humbling. Because, in the process of waking me up from my mindless state, Christ also gives me a remorse (*not a 'guilt trip' – I could do that on my own*) – but a gracious, compassionate remorse for any harm that I've done to myself & others while I was behaving “*like a block of wood.*” It comes with all-forgiving love – empowers me to make helpful reparations to myself & others – and increases not only *my* joy, but the joy of those whom I now treat much better than I did before. I can't be sure that this mindful joy is what Easter joy is all about, but I'm coming to believe that it is a key part of it. Thanks for listening!