

FROM FEAR TO TRANSFORMATION

Luke 24: 13-35

How many of you have ever been through a crisis? By crisis, I mean some experience that has overwhelmed you, distressed you, pushed you to the edge or even broken you in some way? It could be a health crisis, a vocational crisis, a relationship crisis, a financial crisis... It could be precipitated by some major loss in your life and the way it may trigger a sense of deficiency in you or responsibility and guilt... But however it happens, a crisis throws you into the kind of stress that jams up your ability to think, to feel and to express yourself in any stable way. It becomes hard to concentrate, focus or sleep. You don't know what's real anymore. You lose perspective. Past and future disappear into an overwhelming present that can bury you... I feel for all those families and neighbours in Nova Scotia personally marked by the terrible tragedy that has befallen them this past week. Crisis is what they're going through right now.

And this is exactly what the disciples of Jesus are going through in our gospel reading, too. It's still Easter Sunday. There are reports that Jesus' body is missing. This just compounds the terror they're already carrying after they witnessed what the authorities had done to him. Seeing Jesus... hanging on a cross as he was, tortured, beaten to a pulp, hardly recognizable, dying in slow agony... How do you come to terms with such images, etched as they are in your brain? Wouldn't they be next since they were his front-line disciples? Either they hide, which is what some of their group were doing, or else they leave the disaster site to get away, which is what the two in our story are doing... Fear is what's driving them.

So where did they go wrong as disciples? Did they follow a failed messiah? But he proclaimed such a beautiful vision of a God of love in a time so full of hateful violence, corruption, injustice and despair. Had they missed something they should have picked up?

Well, no doubt, the two in our scripture reading are immersed in trying to figure out some answers. But as they are engrossed in conversation, some stranger joins them. We're told it's Jesus, but the two don't recognize him. Why? Well, imagine for a moment what they'd been through. Imagine the fear they must be carrying. Imagine the images of Jesus just a few days earlier etched in their brains - his broken, bloodied, mutilated corpse on a Roman cross... It doesn't matter what this stranger looked like, it couldn't be Jesus...

OK, so how is it that they come to recognize him in the end? Well, we're told that when they finally arrive at their destination, Jesus with them, they share a meal together. And somehow, in the meal, as Jesus takes the bread, blesses, breaks and distributes it, we're told

their eyes are opened and they recognize him. What Jesus does in this meal is exactly what he did days earlier when they shared a last meal together. And so, they recognize him.

But here's the thing. After Jesus disappears from their sight, They tell each other this: "Were not our hearts burning within us already while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"... The recognition had started even earlier, when Jesus was talking to them on the road. So, what was Jesus talking to them about? Let me quote Jesus' exact words: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared! Was it not necessary that the messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

Was it not necessary that the messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?... God in Jesus must enter the darkness where we are, in order to meet us where we are, awaken us and engage us, because only from within our situation, only as we are awakened and engaged, will real transformation happen. God doesn't just sit above us, waving a magic wand of healing, some global vaccine, some epic rescue to us passive recipients. No. Real learning and real transformation happens when God enters our world, enters our lives, enters our crises, meets us in our darkest, most vulnerable, pain-filled, isolated and lonely places of fear and grief... and shines a light, takes us by the hand and challenges us to get up and walk in faith, faith that love can rise up again and again no matter how many times it is crushed and murdered, faith that we can heal and grow, learn and transform through the choices we are empowered to make and the actions we are moved to take...

OK, preacher, so how does this work: this God coming to where the darkness is, the cross, and awakening us and activating us toward transformation? How does it work?

OK, let me tell another story. In 2011, in Nottingham England, James Hodgkinson, a 28 year-old paramedic, was out with his father and a few friends after watching a cricket match. They ran into a group of young men. There was an altercation. One of the young men punched James in the head. James collapsed. Even though he had minor injuries on the outside, bleeding started in his brain. Everything was done, but it wasn't enough. James was put on life-support. Nine days later, he died. The men were all arrested, but in the end, only one was charged, the man who threw the fatal punch. His name was Jacob Dunne. He was 19 years-old. A trial ensued. Jacob was found guilty for manslaughter. But here's the thing. He was sentenced to a mere 4 years, but even with that, because of his age and because he pleaded guilty, in the end he only served 13 months... a mere 13 months! Everyone was shocked – from victims services, to lawyers and justices... Shocked! How could such a short sentence serve as a deterrent? How could such a short sentence account for the value of a young man's life so full of promise?... And if this wasn't bad enough, in those 13 months

absolutely nothing was done to engage Jacob by confronting him with what he had done, with the choices he had made all the way to that fateful day when he threw that punch. Nothing was done in prison to help Jacob face anything that could lead to remorse or reform. Where was the justice in any of it?

But here's where the story gets interesting. Enter, the dead man's mother Joan. She was terribly upset and angry. Understandably! But then, enter a rights group called Remedi. Remedi is into promoting opportunities for restorative justice. Restorative justice is about trying to find ways for victims and their families to be brought together, into safe dialogue with the perpetrators. The hope and prayer is that healing may happen on both sides. Joan, the dead man's mom, and Jacob, who had thrown the fatal punch, were brought together. What happened? Joan had all kinds of images of seeing a hardened man full of hate. What she witnessed was a broken young man, abandoned by his so-called friends to take the fall, abandoned by a family who had already neglected him and wanted nothing to do with him, deeply remorseful for having made a bad choice... Somehow, Joan's heart which had shrunk, started to grow... Here was a young man with no one positive in his life... Joan kind of became his mother... Jacob began to rebuild his life... He studied criminology... He now wants to help other young men caught in violence, living out of fear, desperate for love, vulnerable to being drawn in, used, abused and taken advantage of... He wants to help them heal like he's begun to heal. Isn't this an incredible story?

Here's what Joan has to say about forgiving Jacob: "It's taken a long time to feel comfortable with the word forgiveness. I used to feel that if I forgive Jacob it meant I'd forgotten James. But now that Jacob has done so well, forgiving him feels really... natural. Forgiveness for me means being at peace, letting go of the bitterness and letting Jacob into my life. I've grown fond of him..." And here's what Jacob has to say: "Although I expressed how sorry I was to her, I also have to thank her from the bottom of my heart for initiating our correspondence and having the courage to meet me. If she had never challenged and confronted me I would most likely have ended up back in prison some day. It's incredible to me that those who I hurt the most have judged me the least." From fear, to learning, to a journey of transformation...

OK, preacher, beautiful story... so what does this have to do with the Jesus story? Remember what he told the two on the road? "**Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and only then enter into his glory?**" God's way of saving and healing in Jesus is not some big external rescue where we humans are passive recipients from the expert healers, providing a vaccine, and then using the power of law and force to implement social change... That can only work as long as you keep rescuing and enforcing... No. Real transformative change comes from inner learning, letting go of the fear and becoming participants on a healing journey outwards... That means God in Jesus must enter into our situation and save us from within outwards. God becomes human and goes where it

is the darkest, into the greatest injustice, violence and suffering, crucified on a cross... and by shining the light of love in the middle of that darkness, transformation begins to happen from inside out.

Jacob could have been sentenced for life in prison. That's what the full force of the law could do. Joan could feel gratification in that sentence for a time. But what learning and transformative healing could happen for either of them? But by entering into the darkness of pain and grief, and finding the inspiration to love in the midst of that darkness, genuine learning and transformation began to happen.

True healing, true transformation that really changes our lives and the world around us, must happen from within, not externally imposed... And this is not only relevant for us in this season of Covid-19. It is also relevant for us as we are collectively grieving the senseless murder of so many lives full of promise and goodness in Nova Scotia. God enters are darkness and transforms from within. What does that mean?

I don't know about you, but I've noticed something in this crisis. Often, the public mood and the focus of news reports has moved quickly to anger and judgement, even as the grieving and lament has also been part of it. What I also see is people really coming together, even in isolation and social restriction... finding creative ways to come together to grieve and to express love any which way they can... from lighting a candle to other simple ways of expressing how much we care and how much we hurt with those directly touched by the loss. It's as if we are all that much more vulnerable and that much more tender... We have less energy to point fingers and judge. We have deeper need to share love and feel it... It's as if tears come more easily, and when we can feel the tears, darker currents of hate and rage and us versus them have less power to take over.

My hope and prayer, is that this Spirit of Jesus, as I would call it, may become full-scale resurrection for some of us and hopefully, many of us... as we are living the vulnerability of Covid-19... ready to reach out to one another and support one another... That love may win... that love may rise up again and again, even as it is crushed by mass murderers and an insidious virus... We need to shift ever more from me to we, from I to us in our collective being... **“Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and only then enter into his glory?”** It was necessary, for this is how the divine Spirit can transform us most profoundly... by coming to be where we are and engaging us to rise up from within the darkness of our pain and vulnerability...

Let us pray: Save us, O God... not by waving some magic rescue wand in the sky, no... Save us by awakening us, engaging us and activating us within... Save us by reaching outwards into the world through our hearts... Save us so that we can begin to live resurrection even in a world of disease and murder... We believe; help our doubt; Amen.