

Which Story?

Luke 24:13-35

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The Risen Christ comes back to the very ones who betrayed the Crucified Jesus, came back to them and resumed the conversation.

-Karl Barth

Growing up I was part of a talkative, story-telling family. Living in small town west Texas with all four grandparents nearby and numerous great-uncles and aunts stopping by, visiting, coming to town, plus other various relatives and neighbors, most all of whom were talkative, I heard lots of stories.

Outside the kitchen door was the porch with a big-old pecan tree that leaned because of the years my grandfather propped his feet on it as he sat on the porch. We all gathered under the tree and on the porch of my grandparent's house probably two or three times a week – more in the summer-time – and talked and told stories with an unending stream of relatives and neighbors and friends. My grandfather would tell about hoboing out to California and back during the Great Depression. My grandmother and her brother would tell about their father who had been orphaned as a baby because of a Comanche attack that killed everyone in his family and him being raised by another family. My uncle would tell about playing high school football on two state championship teams. My dad and grandfather would compare stories of the various droughts and dust bowls they had experienced. On and on until it was time to go home and go to bed.

It was there, on the porch, under that tree, that I heard the stories that told me who I was and where I'd come from. Those old stories gave me identity and reminded me that I was part of something larger, and older than myself.

The great twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, said that the God we worship is a talkative God. It is the very nature of the Trinitarian God to be outwardly reaching, seeking, communicating. Barth reminded us, "Creation begins as an aspect of the speech of God." God said, "Let there be light." God said, God spoke, God called all creation to being (see William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, p. 144-145). In our Old Testament, what Judaism calls the Shema, begins, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). This is considered the most important of all prayers and is to be recited twice a day and taught to children. It says, in other words, "Listen! God is talking." Further down in Deut. 6:20 we are told that when your children ask, "Why do we have to keep all of these rules and why do we have to behave in such a way," the answer is not a list of the things God wants and not a list of the attributes of God or a list of the attributes of God's people. The answer to the children's question is to tell them the story of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

The tradition of scriptural commentary by the rabbis to this day is to tell stories. One rabbi might tell a story about Moses and the Exodus. Another rabbi, perhaps centuries later, will not respond by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of what the first rabbi said. Instead, he will tell another story.

This God speaks to a people, who learn storytelling from this God. And this God becomes incarnate as the very living Word, in a rabbi from Nazareth who tells stories. We call them parables.

The late writer, Romulus Linney, in his book *Jesus Tales*, says that there was a legend that the Apostle Peter was bald headed. The old story said that every time, Jesus told a parable, Peter would scratch his head trying to figure out what the parable was about. In fact, for the rest of his life Peter pondered Jesus' parables and as he did so, he would scratch his head. That's why Peter was bald headed.

Karl Barth said that this God we worship will not keep silent. Even after the crucifixion, Jesus comes back and keeps on talking. As Barth said, "The Risen Christ comes back to the very ones who betrayed the Crucified Jesus, came back to them and resumed the conversation" (quoted in Willimon, *Conversations with Barth*, p. 145).

That's what happens here in our story of the Resurrected Jesus in Luke 24. On Easter evening two disciples of Jesus are going home. Fed up, beat down, worn out, and afraid, they decide to get out of Jerusalem, where there were too many Roman soldiers, too many tall-steeple preachers, and too much trouble. "Let's head-out to Emmaus, where it is quiet, the neighbors are all trustworthy, and where we can lay-low until this all blows over." The seven-mile walk, about two hours or so, was plenty of time for them to work through what had just happened to Jesus – his arrest and crucifixion. They are retelling, rehearsing, and re-memembering the week just gone by, and a stranger comes

along and joins them. Luke tells us that it was the Resurrected Jesus but, as of yet, the disciples do not recognize him.

So, the disciples are talking, telling and retelling the events of the week, and this stranger says, “What are y’all talking about?” Luke says this question stopped the disciples in their tracks. Genuinely shocked that this stranger had not heard what had happened the previous week, “What?! You don’t know? You haven’t heard? You’re not on Facebook and social media?” and Cleopas adds, “You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard.” And Jesus says, “What are you talking about?” They reply, “The news about Jesus of Nazareth! He was a prophet of God both in action and in word (‘Man oh man, could he tell some stories, and could he preach.’). But the big-steeple preachers and the governor got together, got him condemned, and then they crucified him.”

Then they make one of the most poignant comments in the entire Bible, “But we had hoped...” “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped that he was going to win the election. We had hoped he was going to change things. We had hoped he would ride into town on a white horse, kick some Roman rear and run them out of the country. We had hoped he would straighten up the preachers, clean up the corruption, balance the budget, feed the hungry, rebuild the infrastructure, get everyone a job, reform the schools, stop climate change, and cure the virus.” We had hoped – past tense. They used to hope. But not anymore. Hope is overrated. Hope is not to be trusted. Don’t get your hopes up because you’ll just be disappointed.

They continue, “And that’s not all. Some of the women we know say they went out to his tomb this morning and found his body missing. And they had seen a vision of angels who told them he was alive. So, some of the men disciples, whom we otherwise trust, went out to see for themselves and they found the tomb empty, just like the women said...”

Then this stranger says in response, “Listen! I’m going to tell you the whole story.” Luke says, “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets” he retells them the story of what has been happening in Jerusalem.” In other words, Jesus tells them the story they thought they knew was wrong or at least, badly misinterpreted and inadequate. Their story was distorted. The story of what they thought was supposed to happen – that the Messiah would come and win, beat the Romans, defeat the enemies of God and Israel in a big battle and then the Messiah would dance on the steps of the Temple with his arms raised high in victory, like Rocky, was a distortion. It was a misleading and dangerous story. They thought the story was about power and getting their guns ready and having the biggest god who can whip all other gods. Of course, Rome, entrenched religion, and the powers-that-be had other plans. They brutally kill Jesus and seek to destroy his movement. As a result, Jesus’ followers are traumatized, in despair, and are either in hiding, or on the run.

Jesus tells them a different story. Jesus tells them the truth, a story which makes sense of the Bible, makes sense of their lives, and makes sense of the world. Using the Bible, Jesus re-narrates everything.

Anna Akhmatova was a poet well known in the old Soviet Union, despite the fact that most of her poetry was banned for most of her life. In the poem

“Requiem” tells about the political imprisonment of her son and of her long days standing with the other mothers and relatives outside the prison. In a prologue to the poem, Akhmatova writes, “I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing beside me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she stared out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

““Can you describe this?””

“And I said, ‘I can.’ Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face” (cited in Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, p. 22).

Jesus comes along and describes the brutality and death these disciples had experienced and been told in a way they had never seen before. He tells them the old, old story of a Messiah who comes as a suffering servant, not a conquering hero, and who wins by losing, gains victory by dying, and who loves, shows mercy, gives grace, and brings hope to a despairing people. This Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, is crucified by the powers-that-be, but God raises him after three days and by so doing, inaugurates a new creation, a new world, and a new way of living in which people of all kinds and all sorts can join and become members of the one household of God. And through this crucifixion and resurrection, God is beginning the healing of this broken world, knitting together frayed creation, reconciling and making peace where there had been no peace.

Many of you have experienced some of this healing and hope through good therapy where your old story is re-narrated, reframed, and retold in a way that allows you to see yourself and your world in a new and healing way.

Here as the church, every Sunday we tell and retell the story of God's reconciling love through Jesus Christ, so that in the light of Christ, all of our old stories of darkness, defeat and damage, dehumanization and despair and distortion can be healed and transformed.

It is not so simple nor as superficial as learning to see the glass half-full instead of half-empty. It is that our vision is changed so that we can begin to see the world as it truly is and see each other as we truly are. And it is not that we see only goodness and light. By the light of Christ, we see the world's brokenness and the cracks of our lives, but we learn to see them as the very places where God's light shines through. As Paul says, right now we see partially but someday – the day we are living toward, we will see fully and completely (I Cor. 13:12).

Which story are you living by? The false story, the partial story, the distorted story that tells us the only way to live is by force? That God wants us to use violence? That we are to destroy and exploit God's creation.? That the "economy" of free-market capitalism is something for which we should be willing to sacrifice ourselves and others? (By the way, you show me what you're willing to sacrifice yourself, and especially others, to and I'll show you what or who you worship. The call of Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick for us to be willing to die for the economy is nothing less than idolatry!)

This old world is dying from this old distorted story. We need another story, an alternative story that says let's value and celebrate long walks with our children, when in the past we've been too busy. Let's give thanks to God for clear skies, no traffic, and this small a bit of healing of creation. Yes, we're working toward getting people back to their jobs and we're working at feeding people and we thank God for our health care providers, and our grocery workers, our city and county utility and service workers, and so many others who keep things going while we try to practice shelter-in-place and social distancing.

Yet when all is said and done, we do not have to return to the old distorted story. Austin Heights and friends of Austin Heights, we are called to show and tell another story. It's a story this mean, angry, fear-filled world needs to hear. It's the story of God's redemption and healing through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. That's our story!

Those two disciples on the road to Emmaus are so taken with this stranger's story, that when they get to their house, they invite him to stay with them. They get supper together as he continues to talk and tell them this new story. And at the table together, as he blessed the bread, broke it and shared it, then their vision is transfigured, and they see Jesus for who he truly is and see the world and their lives truthfully. He then disappears from their sight and they rush out the door all the way back to Jerusalem to give their testimony that they had seen and heard the living Lord.

In his memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Scott Momaday tells of his growing up in Oklahoma and the time he spent with his grandmother, who was

full-blooded Kiowa. He remembers the stories from his grandmother about the Kiowa people and their history and stories. How they were nomads and poor in the Rocky Mountains until the 17th and 18th century when they journeyed into the southern Great Plains and discovered the horse. Soon they became among the greatest of tribes. Momaday heard these stories over and over.

He tells that one night, as a boy, his family were preparing to go home, and he went upstairs to tell his grandmother goodnight. He stopped short of her bedroom door because something told him that what was going on was important, perhaps even sacred. He watched his grandmother, with her long black hair down her back, kneel at the bedside. She lifted her hands upward and he listened to her begin to sing and chant in the Kiowa language. He stood there transfixed, never saying a word, and barely breathing. As she finished, Momaday quietly slipped away never saying a word. But he wrote that when he left there that night, he knew he was Kiowa.

When we leave our worship, do we know we are Christian?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.