

Holy Heartburn

Luke 24:13-35

April 3, 2005

Although it is the Easter season and spring finally seems to be around to stay, the pall of death hangs on around us. We mourn with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters upon the death of Pope John Paul II, the leader of their church. We have kept vigil with the Schiavo/Schindler family in the past weeks as decisions were made regarding her life and death. We shared the fears of another tsunami with Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, as they suffered another earthquake on Monday and the loss of hundreds of lives. We watched with sadness as rescuers used hacksaws, hammers, even bare hands to try to reach those trapped under the rubble. We have wept along with parents and friends at the funerals of innocent youth gunned down by a student at Red Lake High School in Minnesota. We have recently marked the two year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, costing over 1,500 American lives and an estimated 16,000-18,000 Iraqi civilians. As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we wonder if the resurrection of Jesus is simply a rumor or an idle tale.

Our hearts are aching with grief and sorrow, just like those two disciples walking down the road to Emmaus that Easter afternoon. In the past 48 hours, they have witnessed the execution of a man they had followed.¹ Now there were rumors that their leader was alive again. This isn't a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll they are taking toward a remote village outside of Jerusalem. They are high-tailing it out of there before they are identified with their leader and suffer the same fate as he did. Walking at a brisk pace, they cast anxious glances over their shoulders. Their discussion must be fairly animated, trying to remember how they got into this mess in the first place, wondering where to go from here, cursing the Roman occupation, disappointed that Jesus had failed to deliver the promised new social order.

Into the midst of their heated discussion, a stranger appears. We know that it is Jesus, but they do not recognize him. He asks what they've been throwing back and forth to one another. It is noted that the travelers look gloomy. They must be reluctant to respond to this stranger, fearful that he is a spy, pretending ignorance but probably testing them to see where they cast their loyalties in the face of recent events. How ironic that Jesus plays dumb about the tragic circumstances that have fallen upon him.

Throwing caution to the wind, Cleopas launches into a testimony about Jesus of Nazareth, who preached the prophetic word of God, but who

was crucified before he could fulfill his mission. Cleopas expresses his deep despair and anguish, “But we had trusted that he was the one to liberate Israel.” Cleopas had staked his life on this messianic movement, hoping that it would finally be the one to break the yoke of Roman oppression. He had risked his life to stand up to the imperial overlords. But Jesus’ movement had not toppled the ruling tyrants; instead he was undermined by the very people he came to liberate.

To add to this, now a rumor was circulating that Jesus’ body had disappeared. Some followers claimed visions of angels and an empty tomb, leading them to imagine Jesus’ resurrection. The authorities had probably hidden the body so they could go after his followers. It was all so confusing, mind-boggling, and disturbing.

Jesus walks along with them, embracing their darkness, listening attentively to their story, and feeling their pain. Then he responds with, of all things, a Bible study. He recognizes that they don’t quite get the story they’ve just told him, nor do they recognize that the main character of the story is walking right beside them. So he opens the Bible and reveals the workings of God.

He begins with his thesis, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer?” Suffering was so foreign to their concept of Messiah. They expected a military warrior who would topple the oppressive regime, not a helpless wimp. They expected God to act from the top down, not from the bottom up. Then he reminds them of the counterintuitive wisdom of the prophets who work in solidarity with the underdog, not in cooperation with the powers. Jesus himself embraced the prophet Isaiah’s mission when he embarked upon his ministry, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). God performs a paradigm shift that the disciples have not yet grasped.

Jesus notices that they are “slow of heart,” which is a euphemism for lack of courage. They aren’t brave enough to recognize that suffering in solidarity with the exploited and brokenhearted is the gift of God among them. It’s a countercultural way of being, for their culture and ours tells us that domination, force, and power are the winning ways. But the prophets and Jesus teach us that the way of God is through nonviolent, sacrificial, creative love.

It is later, in hindsight, after their meal with this stranger and their recognition of his identity as the risen Lord, that the disciples realize that their hearts were transformed from aching to burning as he interpreted the

scriptures for them. Their fear was transformed once again into hope as he spoke of the upside down ways of God. Their cowardice was conquered by conviction as they saw that all had not been lost in Jesus' death; he had shown them a new way of unmasking the powers. Their sluggish hearts were resuscitated through the interpretation of scripture. Their blind eyes, deaf ears, and hard hearts were opened to the difficult truth of discipleship under the shadow of death. It is a way of compassionate solidarity and shared suffering.

Even in the midst of suffering, when our eyes, minds, and hearts are opened to this truth, we too can find our aching hearts rekindled with renewed commitment.

In her new book, Anne Lamott tells of a Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."²

When our hearts are broken in pain or sorrow, the holy word of God can come inside. Archbishop Rowan Williams write, "the good news of Christianity is that, since God suffers human pain, since God is the victim of human injury, then there is beyond all our sin a love that is inexhaustible. God's love for this creation never comes to a point where it can take no more."³ Because God has suffered, God suffers with us, sharing the pain of attack upon our hearts and loving us to life once again.

When we walk under the shadow of death, we remember that we are not alone. The suffering Christ and loving God is sharing the pain and sorrow of the Catholic community; Terry Schaivo's family and friends; victims of the tsunami, earthquake, and floods; parents, siblings, and friends heartbroken by the violence done to their children; the people of Iraq and of families who have lost loved ones in the fighting there. God is there on the cross, in solidarity with their pain.

And as the Body of Christ we are called to be with families facing crises and life or death decision. Perhaps we are called to use a week of vacation on a mission trip to rebuild homes and communities destroyed by disaster as a tangible means of expressing our solidarity for others in pain. There are lonely youth, crying out for mentors who will listen to them and walk beside them through the challenges of adolescence; maybe we need to sacrifice an hour or two a week of leisure time to spend with a kid in need. There are soldiers returning from Iraq who have seen more bloodshed than

we want to know of; they need safe places to debrief and recover from the horrors they have witnessed.

Thomas Merton said, “As long as we are on Earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.”⁴ The love we offer one another resets the Body of broken bones. The love we share softens hardened hearts. The love we give rekindles the flames of cold, lifeless hearts. The love we offer reflects the suffering love of God. May we love as Christ loves us.

¹ Thanks for much of this biblical interpretation to Ched Meyers, *The Real Road to Emmaus: Reading the Prophets Under the Shadow of Death (Luke 24:13-27)*, posted on www.journeyintofreedom.org, retrieved March 24, 2005.

² Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), p. 73.

³ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995), 51.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 320.