

Resurrection Imagination
Luke 24:13-35
April 6, 2008

A five year old took his first airplane flight to see his grandparents. Shortly after takeoff the plane was in the clouds. With great anticipation the boy turned to his mother and said, "Mommy, I think we're going to see God today!" "What makes you think so?" asked the mother. The boy answered, "Because God lives up here, you know." Soon they were up above the clouds surrounded by blue sky. The child said, "Look, we're in heaven! I see God and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Great-grandma and Uncle Ken." I see God!

It takes Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus a bit longer to see God. They fail to recognize Jesus while he is walking right beside them. Even as he is teaching them their vision is impaired. They are perplexed by the arrest, trial, and crucifixion encountered by their beloved friend. In the fog of grief they are escaping Jerusalem and the horror of the past week. They are not ready to realize the deeper significance of all the events. They are unable to see God in the midst of it all.

We can understand that their grief and despair had blinded them to the presence of the very one of whom they were speaking. They had hoped that Jesus would be the one to save Israel. Their hope was shattered with Jesus' death. The remnants of their hope were left in Jerusalem at the foot of the cross. Now they are hopeless, lacking the ability to see beyond the present into the future. They are wallowing in the sadness of loss.

It is at the dinner table that the followers recognize the stranger who has spent the afternoon walking with them and whom they have welcomed into their home. The gestures of this man are familiar: the way he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Finally their eyes are opened and they see Jesus.

Oftentimes I find myself in the situation of those disciples, overcome with the problems of the day, overwhelmed by disappointment at what is not, frustrated that my hopes are not fulfilled. I can spend so much energy wishing that things were different that I fail to recognize the good things that are. It is so much healthier for me to accept the way things are and devote my energies to making what is even better, rather than grieving what is not.

That's what resurrection imagination is about. Imagination is the act of creating a mental image of something that is not yet real. We tend to think of imagination as something that is only appropriate in childhood or in the fantasy world. But if we believe in the Creator God, the risen Christ, and the Spirit of God present with us now, the practice of resurrection imagination is an important spiritual discipline for all disciples of Christ. God continues to create and invites us to be a part of that creative process. As we cultivate an awareness of God in our lives and attentiveness to God's activity among us, we can lend our energies in that good work. In circumstances in which God feels absent, we can envision how things might change if God became present and active.

In the bleak days of fall 2001 following the disastrous events of September 11, one woman began to contemplate what she could do to brighten the dreary landscape and grieving hearts of New York City. Lynden Miller is a landscape architect. One of her contacts in Holland called to extend an offer of help to the residents of New York. Lynden asked if he had a few extra bulbs he might share. He donated a half million daffodil bulbs to the city. He solicited another 500,000 daffodils and 90,000 yellow tulips from Rotterdam. Eventually more than 1.5 million bulbs had been donated locally and internationally. On October 20th, 2001, 10,000

volunteers planted 250,000 bulbs throughout the city. In spring as the beautiful flowers broke through the slush and snow of winter as a gift of new life, they reminded the people of New York City that their lives and their city would rise again to new life. The Daffodil Project has continued, sprinkling resilient blossoms of bright yellow onto that bleak gray canvas of misery.

That's resurrection imagination – seeing the possibilities of renewal where all seems hopeless.

An artist doesn't look at a blank canvas and grieve the absence of beauty. The blank canvas is an invitation to create. A dirty moldy gourd is not just ugly rubbish leftover in the garden; it is beautiful bowl, a smooth golden surface crying out to be etched or painted with images. A musical composition is not written to be left in silence on paper. It cries out to come to life as instruments lift individual notes off the page and harmonize them for the ear to hear. The artist doesn't dwell on what is not, but sees what is possible.

Author Denise Levertov has a profound statement about the consequences of failing to cultivate the imagination. She says, "Man's capacity for evil, then, is less a positive capacity, for all its horrendous activity, than a failure to develop man's most human function, the imagination, to its fullness, and consequently a failure to develop compassion." The lack of imagination allows evil to thrive. The healthy nurturing of imagination enables us to develop compassion, to imagine what it is like to walk in another's moccasins.

Our world might be so different if we used our imagination to feel the pain of others, to enter into their circumstances, to share their burdens. In his Nobel Lecture upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, Muhammad Yunus reminded us that 94% of the world income goes to 40% of the population. That means that 60% of the world population live on only 6% of the world income. In an effort to address this situation Yunus founded the Grameen Bank to fund microloans to poor families. He creatively uses his imagination, energy and resources to envision a poverty-free world. He said, "In a poverty-free world, the only place you would be able to see poverty is in the poverty museums. When school children take a tour of the poverty museums, they would be horrified to see the misery and indignity that some human beings had to go through. They would blame their forefathers for tolerating this inhuman condition, which existed for so long, for so many people."ⁱ

Imagine the only place where you would be able to see poverty is in poverty museums. When such a vision is shared, we can pool our energies to make such a vision a reality.

It is happening on a small scale in New Delhi, India, where an estimated 45,000 street kids live. These kids under age 18 hustle to earn a buck shining shoes, picking rags, and selling tea along the mobbed streets of Delhi's crumbling old city. The average daily wage is 60 cents. With no safe place to sleep, their money would often be stolen or they would blow it on electronic games which would be stolen or a Bollywood movie they had already seen. Over six years ago a children's advocacy group started the Children's Development Bank. It was begun in the corner of a boys' night shelter, providing the children a safe place to stash their money, earn interest, and even borrow to start a business. Every customer and employee of the bank is under age 18. Twenty boys collaborated to start the bank and write the rules. The boys run the bank, offer 3.5 percent interest, require a one-rupee minimum balance, and accept no money from drugs or stealing. Two boys receive nightly deposits when the bank opens at 6:30 p.m. Nine of them serve on a committee that reviews applications for "advances." Not only are the boys saving money, they are also learning business practices. These children who were illiterate upon arriving in the city are now dreaming of opening their own small business. Recognizing

the need to read and write, nearly 90% of the bank's members are now enrolled in an educational program.ⁱⁱ

With resurrection imagination, we can picture the stories of these street kids told in the exhibits of poverty museums. We have the opportunity of using our imagination to develop compassion and change lives, even change the world. When we partner with the life-giving activity of God, the future we envision can become a reality. We can see God and witness to the presence of God even in the small acts of everyday life – breaking bread, planting daffodil bulbs, putting 50 cents a day in the bank.

I encourage you to make the statement of that little boy in the airplane your own mantra: “I’m going to see God today.” Even in the bleakest of circumstances, be on the lookout for ways in which God is at work, bringing new life out of old, birthing transformation and change. With resurrection imagination, even the impossible can become possible.

ⁱ Muhammad Yunus, “Poverty is a Threat to Peace,” *The Progressive Christian*, Vol. 181, No. 6, November/December 2007, p. 52.

ⁱⁱ Heidi J. Shrager, “India’s Street Kids Bank on Change,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 19, 2007.

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