

The Story We Tell Ourselves

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: April 23, 2023

Readings

Isaiah 43:1–12

Psalm 116:11–16

I Peter 1:13–25

Luke 24:13–35

Opening

The responsibilities of fatherhood bring not a few solemn duties, not the least of which is educating one's children with good musical taste across a range of genres. From the U2 catalogue to Miles Davis and John Coltrane, to 70s singer-songwriters like Jim Croce and Carole King, into old school country music that grew up around these Appalachian mountains—these are the sounds I want in their ears.

A little while back I asked Colin what kind of music he preferred, whether electric guitars like U2 or acoustic sounds like singer-songwriters. His sincere answer to this question was another question: 'Which one is Johnny Cash?' His absolute favorite! A inimitable voice, a signature rhythm, songs with stories—Johnny Cash is one of the best.

Cash and other country music greats put melody and rhyme to our experience of sorrow and heartache that some have called Appalachian fatalism; a mindset that 'if something can go wrong, it will.' You hear that kind of mindset in one of my personal favorites from Cash, *Big River*:

*Now I taught the weeping willow how to cry, cry, cry
And I showed the clouds how to cover up a clear blue sky
And the tears that I cried for that woman are gonna flood you, big river
And I'm gonna sit right here until I die*

There are dozens more songs like these in the Cash catalogue that are variations on the same themes of heartache and heartbreak. As songs have refrains and choruses, the stories we tell ourselves have recurring themes. 'Same song, second verse,' we say. 'One more time around this same mountain.' We tell stories to make sense of the world, especially the stories of our pain. Listen closely to the stories we tell ourselves and you'll hear not only a narrative, you'll find an entire worldview, a lens through which one sees all events, past, present, and future.

Where Stories Go To Die

On the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and another disciple are trying to make sense of the world after witnessing the brutal torture and death of Jesus of Nazareth. What else was there to discuss as they left Jerusalem for the countryside? Conversations like these are like a search. When two friends have experienced a dramatic event, their exchange of thoughts and words has a searching quality. How do we fit what we've just witnessed with everything we've known, everything else that came before?

That's the kind of conversation that's happening between friends when an unnamed, unknown traveler joins them, the traveler that we know is the risen Lord Jesus. The hidden Jesus then inquires what kind of conversation they're having. That question itself deepens their despair. Note what St Luke says of Cleopas and his friend, 'They stood still, looking sad.' And this is the nature of so many of the stories we tell ourselves, the conversations we share with one another to make sense of things: we're frozen in despair. We tell stories to survive, yet our stories have a refrain of indefinite sadness *where we have no room for resurrection*. Resurrection is a rumor, an idle tale, a story without real credibility.

Now here's the thing: read St Luke's Gospel as a whole and you'll notice Jesus addresses his disciples on three occasions about his destiny. *Jesus tells them the true story they must believe to make sense of things*. 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'¹ Thus Jesus had spoken to the twelve on three occasions. On the second occasion he even said, 'Let these words sink into your ears...' Luke is also clear to inform his readers that at each moment they could not grasp what Jesus was saying. They had no room for a story where God's Messiah would suffer, die, and rise on the third day. That story didn't make sense of the world.

Cleopas and his friend may not be numbered among the eleven remaining disciples, but Luke clearly wants us to see they are in the same company of the eleven and the faithful women who followed Jesus to Jerusalem. And when Jesus asks them to say more about what transpired in Jerusalem, there are a few signals that Cleopas was either present or had access to Jesus' foretelling his death. Cleopas mentions chief priests and elders and the third day, the very same language Jesus used when he foretold his death three times.

Isn't that interesting? We have all the words, the phrases, the very script itself and yet we don't believe this story is the true story, the way we ought to understand everything in the past, the present, the future. It's possible to say all the right things and still lack faith that Jesus is risen and rules the universe by the power of his resurrection.

Without a living faith in the risen Christ, Cleopas tells the story of Jesus, calling him a **prophet** mighty in word and deed, who was subsequently crucified. It is at this point that Cleopas says to Jesus himself, 'We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.' Past tense. The matter is decided. The hope has been shattered. Yes, there remains the swirling rumor that a few women of their number did not find his body when they visited the tomb, but the resurrection in Cleopas' story is in the appendix, not the main narrative. No, Cleopas signaled 'The End' to his story when he said, 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'

¹ Luke 9.22

I wonder how many times they had spoken or heard the phrase, 'We had hoped...' How many times did they hear that phrase 'We had hoped...' as boys? How many other miracle workers, charismatic figures, revolutionary types stirred hope within the hearts of their grandparents, only to be crushed and killed by mighty Rome, too? 'We had hoped' is the story that Cleopas tells now. For a while, he made room for a new messiah story where the Anointed of God would redeem the world from evil. But like his ancestors before him, all stories ending with the death of a would-be messiah end with the death of hope. That's the story they've told themselves for centuries.

The Best Rebuke of All

And how does the Anointed of God, the risen Christ, veiled from Cleopas' vision, respond? How does he answer these two disciples and the story they tell? Not the way we would expect. We would expect compassion from the Lord for two souls weighed by sorrow, but Jesus does not respond with pity. There's a sinister enemy descending on their souls; it is the enemy of Despair. And Despair notoriously has an undertow, dragging its prey into an overwhelming darkness. Perhaps this is why our Lord Jesus offers firm correction, instead of compassion. Despair lives off of lies; it feeds off of false gospels. Despair isn't driven out by pity, but by light and truth. Thus Jesus answers Cleopas and his traveling companion, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!' Wake up! You may have the script in front of you but you've gotten the story all wrong. Whatever refrain, whatever chorus, whatever theme you've embraced, it cannot make sense of the story. 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?'

And then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures concerning himself. It was a seven mile catechesis in the Gospel—the distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was unlearning false gospels, unlearning the wrong refrains and choruses, unlearning what the Messiah *ought* to be. It was learning the Gospel, learning that the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world *can only* be the One who was crucified and risen again; learning that the crucifixion and resurrection is the only definition of Reality.

Yes, the (nearly) fatal error was trusting in the story they were telling themselves more than the story Jesus was telling. And we do the same thing. We have the whole script in front of us from Genesis to Revelation. And still we can get the story wrong. In our minds, the resurrection can remain an afterthought rather than the central event that changes everything. Like Cleopas, we know the key words, the key events, but has Christ's suffering and resurrection baptized our hearts and minds? Do we believe that the resurrection of Jesus is the key to understand all reality? Has it become the central event governing our minds, our thoughts, by which we see and make sense of the world?

On Easter Sunday, I spoke how resurrection faith is the furthest thing from spiritual adrenaline or spiritual euphoria. Resurrection faith is not grounded in optimism. Just as the crucified and risen Jesus are the only way to make sense of the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the only story by which we see the events of the 20th and 21st century.

Our only hope in the horrors of Auschwitz; the genocides of Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur; the war in Ukraine; for a country that is literally killing itself one mass shooting after another, is the story of the Son of God become Incarnate, who was crucified, descended to hell, and rose again from the dead on the third day. The Christ who suffered on the cross draws near to suffering in every age so that suffering is never in vain. By his resurrection, he assures us there is a day of recompense where all wrongs will be made right. That is the story of the Emmaus Road and it remains the only real, true story to make sense of this world. That's the only story worth telling ourselves. As Olivier Clement

said, "The saints are seeds of resurrection. Only they can steer the blind sufferings of history towards resurrection."²

How I pray that marriages—whether healthy, broken, or somewhere in between— would discover that the only true story of their marriage is Jesus crucified and risen. How I pray that friendships, whether fervent, cooled, or grown cold, would find solid ground in the story of Christ crucified and risen again. How I pray for families—families who feel they must put forth some appearance, some image, that they must suppress any ugliness or unpleasantness; who must always avoid uncomfortable topics. How I pray that all families would follow the way of Christ, who took up his cross, faced pain and suffering, and *then* entered into glory.

When Hearts Burn

As Jesus baptized the old story anew in his death and resurrection, Cleopas and his friend testified that on the road 'their hearts burned within them.' That is what happens when you hear the Story anew that makes sense of things. When the eyes open, the heart burns with joy. It burns with joy, not only because you're seeing things truly, it burns because you now see Truth Himself in the risen Lord Jesus.

With their hearts burning on the road, they insist that Jesus join them in Emmaus. And there the story joins itself to sacrament. It must be this way; it will always be this way til the end of the world, until the day when sacraments cease. Sacrament is never separate from story. It's why you hear our salvation story every time a newborn Christian is baptized and every time the Church celebrates Eucharist. Likewise, the story is never separated from sacrament. For making sense of our stories in this life is one thing. But making sense of the story that will pass over from this world to the next; well for that, you need a sacrament—the sacrament of the world to come. For when Christ breaks the bread, it is not only our eyes that are opened to see *this* life in its proper light, our eyes are opened to see the unending Light of the world to come. That is the story we must tell ourselves, for this life and for all eternity; for the praise and glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 269.