

The Wondrous Stranger

Luke 24:13-35

The story of what happened on this long-ago day on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus is an important one. It's important because it's the first appearance of the risen Christ in the Gospel of Luke; he comes to the disciples once more later in the chapter, even eats some broiled fish with them. But it's important also because it gives us a model for how we might have our own encounter with the living Christ. These two travelers have their eyes opened – really their hearts are opened – to his divine presence in an earthly moment, the breaking of bread for dinner. And in telling us this story, Luke wants us to know that Christ indeed lives, that the message we proclaim on Easter Sunday – he is risen! – that message is not just for one big day, but for every day and for all time.

This morning we have a retelling of this story that tries to imagine ourselves into this scene, to capture some of the shock and awe of this encounter with the Christ. There are two travelers in Luke's account, but only one is given a name. It's the anonymous one who is the narrator of our story. It's called "The Wondrous Stranger," and I hope you like it.

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My name is not important. At least that's what Luke thought. Cleopas found his way into the Gospel, but we women haunt the edges of the story, faceless and silent.

My name is not important. But no matter. My story – *that* is important. Because I am a witness to the risen Christ. Three days after his death, I have seen the Lord.

This is a story of the heart and the eyes. It is a story of magic, but it began in the most ordinary of ways: with a walk home.

We were on our way back home to Emmaus after the awful events of that Passover weekend. A seven-mile walk, but it seemed like seventy. Our hearts were heavy, for the man we had hoped would finally free Israel from the Romans was dead, never to return. It was agony to see centurions on the road; to our eyes, they were gloating with power.

Never since our first days together have my husband and I been so deep in discussion. We couldn't stop talking, trying to make sense of it all. When the stranger came to us on the road – and I shouldn't say this, because hospitality is everything, of course – when the stranger came, it was a bother to let him into our little world. He seemed to come out of nowhere – strange in that flat land.

We wanted to be alone with our grief and our perplexity. We needed to walk off our sorrow.

But there he was, his sandals scraping along with ours. And when he spoke, we could not ignore him.

"What's this you're discussing so intently?" he asked.

Cleopas rolled his eyes. I was embarrassed – and afraid. It was dangerous to speak of these things.

"Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened in the last few days?" my husband said.

"What? What's happened?"

Cleopas looked at me, incredulous.

I spoke. I know I shouldn't have, in the presence of a man not my husband. But my heart was breaking, and my words were almost like tears. I had to get them out.

"Jesus the Nazorean. That's who we're talking about. You don't know him? He was a prophet, one of the great ones."

On the stranger's lips, the hint of a smile. I felt the anger rise in my face.

"But he is dead!" I cried. "The chief priests and scribes handed him over; they passed a death sentence, and they crucified him. Crucified him, like a common bandit! The one who we had hoped would redeem Israel."

"When was all this?"

"Three days ago – this is the third day, I mean. But that's not all. Some of the women in our group – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James – they went to the tomb where this Jesus lay, to anoint him, of course. This was first thing in the morning, but when they got there, the stone had been rolled away, and the body was gone!"

"We suspect grave robbers," Cleopas put in. "But why? He had no gold or finery."

"But the angels," I said to my husband. And to the stranger: "The women told us they had seen angels there. At the tomb, I mean. And the angels said that Jesus was alive! We went to see for ourselves, some of us did, and they were right: The body was gone. But no angels. And no Jesus."

"We don't know what to think. My husband suspects a plot, but I know those women; they wouldn't make this up, about the angels. So we were trying to understand, here on the road. And then you came."

The stranger looked at us. His eyes were dark and deep; a mystery lived there.

"Consider the prophets," he said. And so he began, speaking with authority, like a teacher with the key to all knowledge.

Oh, he knew the Torah. He started with the books of Moses, and he didn't stop: Isaiah. The Psalms. The Book of Daniel. Even Micah and Habbakuk. "Let not your hearts be troubled," the stranger said. "The Messiah *had* to suffer. It is as it has been written."

We walked and listened. And a peculiar sensation came, at least for me. My heart, where all the emotions lie – it was as if my heart was burning to hear this, on fire for knowing how these days could fit into the history of our people. As we walked, as the stranger spoke, the dead weight in my chest burned clean and hot and pure, like the holy bush before Moses.

I stole a look at my husband. He could not take his eyes off the stranger. His step was light, like mine had become. We walked. We listened.

It was almost sunset when we came near to our little home. The sun was red in the west; finally the cool of evening was approaching.

We reached our turnoff. The stranger kept walking.

"Wait!"

He turned.

"Stay with us. It's almost nightfall. You can't go much farther."

The stranger seemed to consider this. "I couldn't impose."

"Stay," said Cleopas. "We insist."

My husband is not a man you can say no to. The stranger nodded, and the three of us went inside.

I hurried up the dinner. The men sat in the other room, and there was no more talk. Each seemed caught up in his own thoughts. The only sound was the bleating of the goats outside, and the fire crackling under the soup pot.

We sat to eat. "Please, sit here," my husband said, motioning the stranger to the head of the table.

You're supposed to refuse such a gesture. But the stranger took the place of honor as if he had been there all his life. My husband and I exchanged glances.

The stranger looked at the meal and looked at us. He took the loaf and bowed his head in blessing.

My heart burned within me. Holy fire.

The stranger broke the bread and gave it to us.

Hear me, listener. I am a woman of sound mind and good character. I am not much given to the weakness of imagination. And so know that what I tell you is true and can be trusted:

It was the Messiah. There at our table. As he broke the bread, we saw the cruel wounds in his hands, but we saw the love in his eyes.

Without words, this we gave him in return. We looked in awe and trembling and a dawning sense that the impossible had come to pass.

Jesus the Christ was here.

And then, just like that, as we reached for the bread, he was gone. As quietly as he had joined us on the road, he departed; we know not how.

God be praised.

We walk now on the same road, the Emmaus road, but back the other way, to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. Or rather, we run. Or maybe it's floating, or flying like the birds.

Our hearts burn. Christ is risen. We have seen the Messiah.

And as we go, on this road and the next, we are filled to the breaking point of joy with that knowledge. An ordinary man, this wondrous stranger, was the living Christ at our side and at our table. In the breaking of the bread, we knew him.

We look at every face now, watching for signs of that love. We can't take a chance that we'll miss him.

Christ is among us. Watch for him.