

"Haven't I Seen You Before?"

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Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35

Sunday April 6th, 2008

Last Friday marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 4, 1968. A magnificent and visionary leader was taken from us by an assassin's bullet that day. You have all seen the pictures taken on that horrible day. The pictures of Jesse Jackson and others on the balcony of that nondescript motel in Memphis, Tennessee, pointing in the direction that they assumed the shooting had taken place. What a terrible end for a person whose stirring words came like poetry, yet shook the entrenched layers of the world's racism and injustice to the core. Dr. King bled to death from his wounds on that balcony, with one leg haphazardly protruding through the railing at an awkward angle, and his distraught friends weeping and dabbing at his wounds. May none of us meet such an ending.

I am told that if you walk into Dr. King's former church in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the first things that you see is an arresting piece of religious art. It is a mural depicting a life-sized Martin Luther King, Jr. in a cream-colored robe and cincture, arms outstretched in benediction. He is ascending into the clouds surrounded by the mothers and the fathers of the African American church. They are on their way to heaven. Now, if you have seen those photographs taken about 40 years ago on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, I ask you: which portrayal is the true ending of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Is it the scene on the balcony, or the scene in the mural?

And as people of Christian faith, I ask you: is a person's end of life really an end, or is it a beginning to something bigger and beyond?

Long ago on the first Easter evening, two disciples journeyed from Jerusalem back to their home in a village named Emmaus. To this day, no one knows exactly where this Emmaus was, it was so small and unimportant. Cleopas is one of the two believers named, and many persons have assumed another man walked home with him. That's always a possibility, but the pronouns that refer to these two people in Greek are not masculine, they are not feminine, they are neuter, implying that Cleopas traveled in mixed company, with an unnamed woman, most likely his wife, or his mother, or his sister, or his daughter.

It was a journey that had begun like any other several days before. They had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. It might be like one of us, saying, "Well, we're not doing anything unusual for Easter. We'll drive down to Mt. Vernon after church and have Easter dinner with my sister, watch the kids have an egg hunt, and then probably drive around and look at the tulip fields or go out to the beach. Then we'll get home before too late to be ready to start the work week."

The journey had begun in an ordinary way, but when they arrived in Jerusalem for the holiday, Jesus was in town. What a wonderful surprise! This was no ordinary Passover! Then the buzzing began. "Why did Jesus come this year? Do you think he will overturn the Romans, and then replace all the priests, and then will he send that puppet king Herod Antipas packing while he claims the throne of David?" So much speculation and expectation and anticipation! This was going to be a very extraordinary Passover indeed! Change was in the air.

Then it all took a very horrible turn. Jesus had been arrested, and executed in a dreadful way. The image of a dying Jesus on a cross between criminals haunted their imaginations. What a shocking end to a life full of blessing and promise. As they came out of their shock after a couple of days, what more was there to do but return home and pick up the pieces of their lives?

On the walk home, they tried to make sense of it all. Then a stranger joins them. A stranger! You and I know this is no stranger that approaches them along the road. But then, you and I already know that Jesus was raised, and lives! These two did not know that. Oh they had heard reports that the tomb of Jesus was found empty, and that some other believers had reason to think Jesus was still alive. But they also knew that Jesus was unquestionably dead. People just don't come back from the dead.

I heard someone the other day saying that the most history-changing events are never anticipated. The example of September 11, 2001 was given. Nothing like that attack had ever been done, and so it seemingly came out of nowhere, and we were all unprepared for it. Even if rumors of it or hints of it had been picked up, no one would have connected the dots enough to see it coming. It was such an unprecedented and shocking event, and our minds could not accept such a thing until it happened.

Lots of folks have asked, "Why didn't those two people on their way home to Emmaus recognize Jesus? They didn't even think to ask this supposed 'stranger,' 'Haven't I seen you before? You look like someone I know.'" It is a puzzler, isn't it? Two people who had supported Jesus, who had found hope and life and sustenance in his teaching; yet they don't even recognize him while they are walking right next to him on a journey of two to three hours duration!

The resurrection of Jesus was the most history-changing event that the world has seen. Of course these two rational people could not even conceive that this person walking with them was Jesus. Jesus had died! They knew that, and they also knew that people just don't come back from the dead. So the curtains across their mind's eye are drawn tight, and they cannot see that this is indeed Jesus.

It is not until Jesus shares a meal with them that they finally recognize him. It is in the breaking of bread, the blessing and the distribution of the bread that they can see

this person really and truly is Jesus, living and breathing and talking and walking right next to them.

Isn't that wonderful? Jesus doesn't do magic tricks for them. He doesn't give them some massive examination, and he doesn't tell them to go find Holy Grails, or the like. What I'm getting at is this: Jesus does plain old ordinary things with them, and it is through these plain ordinary things that the true Jesus can be found. You don't have to have a mysterious and mystical experience to find the risen Christ. You don't have to accumulate a whole bunch of degrees or course work in discipleship. You don't have to be in the presence of holy relics. The living Jesus is recognized in the hearing of the word and in the breaking of the bread. This is how Jesus chooses to be the resurrected and living one in our midst. He is easy to find, and accessible to all.

You and I know that the crucifixion of Jesus, which looked like a horrible end to a promising ministry, was not the end for Jesus. It opened the doors for a whole new beginning. Resurrection life, and triumph over the death-dealing of our world, is now to be found through this Jesus who comes to us so readily. We know the end of Martin Luther King, Jr. was not a crumpled heap on that motel balcony, but the beginning of a new way to understand the value and worth of others, and to see the price of transformation in the life and death of a faithful leader.

So come to the table of Jesus Christ. Come and share the broken bread, and take the cup of the new promise established by Christ. Come and find the living Christ, who steadfastly remains with us in the breaking of bread. In the living Jesus Christ, there will always be a new beginning to any end that would defeat us. Come, share the cup and the bread, and find the life of Christ. Amen.