

They were just regular people, two individuals of the great crowds of the unknown faithful. There's no story about Jesus finding him in a fishing boat, or coaching him on hauling in the nets, or teasing him by inviting himself to his house to dine. We don't know that Jesus healed her, or cast demons out of her, or brought her precious child back to life./

But they show up twice. At least, this name does. Spelled differently, a difference of one letter, but too similar to mean another person. His name is Cleopas, and we meet him, by name, here, in Luke's gospel, on the road to Emmaus. We meet his wife, a less well-known Mary, when she shows up in John's gospel, at the foot of the cross. And, I believe, we meet her again, here. (pause) /

Once again, it is evening on the day of the resurrection, only today we hear Luke's version of that evening. Two followers of Jesus are traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Cleopas and an unnamed companion whom I am going to assume is Mary, his wife. It is a journey of about seven miles. Alone they walk, these two disciples, and as (1)

they go, they are talking with one another about “everything that has happened...” the events of the past days, and week. Then, a stranger joins them. A stranger who asks to join in on their conversation. A stranger who says, “What are you talking about as you walk along?” /

And they stop, dead in their tracks, which is, maybe, exactly what needs to happen when the Holy breaks in. /

But then, they open their hearts, and tell their story. They tell *his* story. They tell the “Life Story of Jesus of Nazareth.” (pause) /

When we travel, we’re in an in-between space. What some would call a “liminal” space. No longer here, but not yet there, and the freedom that offers us is enormous. And there’s something about having a length of time when you are thrown together with someone on a bus, or a train, or a plane. There you are, individuals, each with your own separate lives. But for this moment you are traveling together, in the same direction. What will you do? You may find yourself plugging into music or a movie, or digging down into a book in order to give yourself some privacy in close quarters. But sometimes, rare times, one of you says something interesting or funny, or you catch one another’s eyes (2)

and smile, or you share an eye roll, and a conversation springs up. You might find yourself talking to this stranger about all sorts of things. Things you would never share in line at the bank, or at the grocery store, or any place where you had to be there only for a minute or two. Here, with the highway disappearing under you, the landscape unfolding around you, the clouds cocooning you: here you may choose to share something a little deeper. Something intimate about your life, your experiences. Are you traveling on business? Are you returning to your hometown for a funeral? Are you going to be reunited with your beloved? Who knows? In circumstances like these, you might find that the words simply spill out of you. You might just tell your life's story. You might find that you open your heart. (pause) /

Cleopas and Mary are traveling home to Emmaus after what must be the most extraordinary week of their lives. And in the liminal space of this journey, they are ready to bare their souls to the stranger who has joined them. Someone who, perhaps, reminds them of someone? They take him into their confidence, a little astonished that he doesn't seem to know automatically what they are talking about, about Jesus. / (3)

“Jesus was a mighty prophet,” they say. “They crucified him,” they continue. “And we had hoped,” they shake their heads sadly, “that he was the one.” And even though some friends had reported that angels were there, claiming Jesus was alive. Others went to the tomb, and they didn’t see him. /

The story they tell together is a sad one. It is a story with an ending in which hopes are destroyed and then rekindled only to be dashed again. But the stranger seems undeterred. In fact, he picks up the thread of the story, chides them gently, and says, “Now, let me tell you a story.” And the words that pour forth from his mouth seem to weave together absolutely everything they need to hear. All God’s mighty works, from creation through the exodus and to and through the prophets, right up unto the present. This somewhat confusing, and somehow, suddenly hopeful day. /

And the effect on them is profound. They are astonished. In fact, when they come to their home in Emmaus, by all appearances, the stranger seems to be planning to go on with his journey. But they won’t have it. Stay, friend, “for it is evening, and the day is almost over.” (4)

Whatever the stranger has kindled in their hearts, they know they don't want it to end. They invite him in. They've already opened their hearts; now they open their home. They offer Jesus hospitality, and that makes all the difference. /

In the ancient world, hospitality was a sacred act. The Middle East offers a climate that contains the lush and fertile crescent. It is also rocky, mountainous terrain and great expanses of hostile wilderness. In such a place, hospitality was a code of honor. It was a moral law, encoded in the religious laws. People welcomed strangers into their homes because not to welcome a stranger might well condemn him to death in the harsh climate, or at the hands of robbers. People welcomed strangers into their homes because they knew that one day, they too might have to depend on the kindness of strangers, and it could be a matter of life and death. (pause) /

Hospitality is the heart and soul of this story. May I be so bold as to say it is fundamental to our faith. It is only by extending hospitality that the travelers have the opportunity to break bread with the stranger. This stranger that just happens to be Jesus. Jesus, who has decided (5)

to abide with his fellow travelers, takes the bread. He blesses it, he breaks it, and he shares it with them. And something in that action is so familiar. Is it the fact that he did those same things on the night before he died? (Cleopas and Mary may or may not have been there.) Or is it something even greater, and somehow deeply truthful about who Jesus is and what Jesus does? Didn't Jesus take his own life, and bless it by his complete faithfulness to God and to humanity? And wasn't that life, in the end, broken and shared? Whatever it is that stirs their memories, their eyes are opened, and they see that the stranger in their midst is Jesus. It has been all along. They weren't just idle tales, or cruel rumors. Christ *is* risen, here, and now. /

And they knew it, and they didn't know it. "Weren't our hearts on fire?" they ask one another. "Weren't our hearts burning as we listened to him?" (pause) /

In her poem "Sometimes," Mary Oliver offers "Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." All of which is precisely what these two travelers have done. They have paid attention, not only to the one they discovered to be Jesus now, but to who and (6)

what he had been before. They have been listening not only to him, but also to their own hearts. And this openness to welcoming a stranger has resulted in a life-changing encounter with the Holy. (pause) /

A long time ago in a Presbyterian magazine a story was shared by a woman who, after 20 years as an ordained minister, realized she lived in what she referred to as a “Christian ghetto.” Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, she only talked to and interacted with “churched” people. It had started to make her feel alienated from those on the journey of life outside the church. /

So, she took a three-month sabbatical and got a job as a hostess in a Waffle House. She discovered that, “The risen Christ showed up every day.” The risen Christ showed up in a mechanic who fixed a broke traveler’s broken van for the price of a cup of coffee. The risen Christ showed up in a landlord who drove an hour and fifteen minutes to pick up a stranded tenant he didn’t know particularly well. The risen Christ showed up in a lawyer who came every day to the Waffle House to meet clients who couldn’t afford the fees charged by his firm. He never turned anyone away. / (7)

There were more, each one of them, people taking their own lives, blessing them with their willingness to serve their fellow human beings, breaking them open for the sake of someone else, and giving them away. The risen Christ, here and now. In the present tense. /

////// Mary Oliver's suggestions: pay attention, be astonished, tell about it. Together with this story, it offers a pretty perfect design for life in an Easter mode. We are just regular people, numbered among the great crowds of the unknown faithful. And we are all travelers on some journey. For this moment we are traveling together, in the same direction. Journeying between the sometimes mundane, sometimes horrifying, sometimes glorious experiences of this life. The highway disappears under us, the landscape unfolds around us, the clouds cocoon us. /

We journey together, in community, and while we do, we try to welcome the stranger into our midst. The unknown person with whom we are willing to break bread offers us the opportunity to meet Christ anew, in the present tense, here and now. / (8)



The stranger in our midst: the young person, the old person, the person of different skin color or nationality, the Jew or Muslim or Buddhist, the gay or lesbian person, the trans or straight person, the person newly arrived from a foreign land, the person who thinks differently from us when it comes to politics, or parenting. The person who is completely other to us, to our experience. That stranger offers us our very best hope of meeting the risen Christ. We most likely will not recognize him when first we meet. But if we can take the risk, if we can welcome him or her in, if we can truly pay attention, and if we open our door or our table or our heart to that stranger... We might just find ourselves astonished, hearts on fire, with something amazing to tell. Thanks be to God. Amen. /////