

Luke 24:13-35 (JB Phillips Translation/Paraphrase)

Then on the same day we find two of them going off to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they went they were deep in conversation about everything that had happened. While they were absorbed in their serious talk and discussion, Jesus himself approached and walked along with them, but something prevented them from recognising him. Then he spoke to them, "What is all this discussion that you are having on your walk?"

They stopped, their faces drawn with misery, and the one called Cleopas replied, "You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all the things that have happened there recently!"

"What things?" asked Jesus. "Oh, all about Jesus, from Nazareth. There was a man - a prophet strong in what he did and what he said, in God's eyes as well as the people's. Haven't you heard how our chief priests and rulers handed him over for execution, and had him crucified? But we were hoping he was the one who was to come and set Israel free ...

"Yes, and as if that were not enough, it's getting on for three days since all this happened; and some of our womenfolk have disturbed us profoundly. For they went to the tomb at dawn, and then when they couldn't find his body they said that they had a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of our people went straight off to the tomb and found things just as the women had described them - but they didn't see him!"

Then he spoke to them, "Aren't you failing to understand, and slow to believe in all that the prophets have said? Was it not inevitable that Christ should suffer like that and so find his glory?"

Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them everything in the scriptures that referred to himself. They were by now approaching the village to which they were going. He gave the impression that he meant to go on further, but they stopped him with the words, "Do stay with us. It is nearly evening and soon the day will be over."

So he went indoors to stay with them. Then it happened! While he was sitting at table with them he took the loaf, gave thanks, broke it and passed it to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew him! But he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Weren't our hearts glowing while he was with us on the road, and when he made the scriptures so plain to us?"

And they got to their feet without delay and turned back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and their friends all together, full of the news - "The Lord is really risen - he has appeared to Simon now!"

Then they told the story of their walk, and how they recognised him when he broke the loaf.

## Walking Dead Man?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: Luke 24:13-35

Many years ago I served as the minister for the month of July on an island off the mid-coast of Maine. It was a small island with but a few summer residents who had bought land when the old, year-round residents gave up trying to scrape a living from land that was more ledge than soil. The island had no ferry and no very good harbor, so those who had bought the property were not the usual tourist. They were an odd mix of people similar only in their common desire for a secluded summer habitation and a willingness to brave uninviting conditions to secure it.

To be their minister was hardly to pastor a congregation of the normal sort. The president of the congregation, for example, with whom I made the preliminary arrangements, was a Harvard professor of the sciences. But what was to become more significant to me, he was an aggressively-convicted atheist. Not your normal church president. Of course, he had not shown these colors during our preliminary correspondence. It was only after I had been delivered to this place from which there was no easy escape that I found out what I was in for. A few days into my stay on the island there came the unmistakable signal of trouble, though the exact nature of it was yet still somewhat hidden. The sign of trouble came in a simple sentence, a sentence that promised another foot would fall. "So, Dudley," the church president said, "you're a smart guy." I knew I was about to find out that I wasn't. "So," he continued, "you're a smart guy; how can you believe in a walking dead man? I mean, that's what you believe, right?"

By instinct I hate conversations like this. In fact, they aren't really conversations at all; they are exercises in humiliation. I tried to dodge the ridicule. As a newly minted Harvard graduate I could fight back. "Well, that's not how I would say it," I offered. "The resurrection is a lot more complicated than that. I would rather say that I believe in the living Christ."

"Exactly," said the president of the church. "You believe that this man was dead and then he came back to life and walked around like nothing had happened to him. The guy was dead and now he's walking around, the living Christ, as you say. So, my question stands. How can a smart guy like you believe a story like that?"

This was going nowhere good. Any attempt at a theological discussion was headed to more mockery. I looked for an exit. Thankfully, Kierkegaard came to the rescue. "Well, it's not a matter of science," I said. "It's a leap of faith." He grumbled his final retort: "It still doesn't explain why smart people go around leaping, leaping for God's sake, at preposterous ideas."

I've thought about that interchange many times, and with fondness. The president of the church and I became friends, and I'm pretty sure there was more going on with him being the president of the church than he was able to admit.

But over the years I've also thought a lot about his question, and his phrasing of it. A walking dead man. And the more I've thought about it, the more I like that way of saying it.

This morning I'd like to tell you why I think that way of saying things is important for our understanding of Jesus, and especially of Jesus' saving work.

In *Faith Beyond Resentment* James Alison says, "I think it very important that we don't make the separation which we are accustomed to when talking about the risen Jesus, imagining that he is alive, and for that reason, not dead. No, what is fascinating about the doctrine of the resurrection is that it is the whole human life of Jesus, including his death, which is risen."<sup>1</sup>

Alison uses this insight to draw out an important aspect of Christian theology. Now, I don't mean important in the sense of something that is an important doctrine, though it might be that. I mean important in the sense that it will change your life. I would like to quote what he says at some length. Alison writes:

[Begin quote] Please indulge me as I try to suck out some juice from this apparently absurd scenario. Since I live in the USA, where a lot of people get executed, let us imagine a prisoner in the Louisiana state penitentiary, which, curiously enough, is called Angola, someone sentenced to die, just as in the film which many of you will have seen, *Dead Man Walking*. Well, the prisoner is led to the execution chamber, and, at the very same instant in which the doctors pronounce him dead, he becomes entirely free of the law, and of the social and police structures of the state of Louisiana, as indeed of the Federal Government. Now, follow me with your imagination. The moment he is free, not only of the law, but of social structures, life commitments like marriage, and so on, he is also absolutely free of resentment. If we imagine him a guy who had been completely opposed to the process which led him to his death, one who protested his innocence, and who considered the use of the death penalty to be an atrocity, then, up till the moment of his death he imagined himself as a victim of all that. His presence was characterized by a tremendous struggle to prevent them taking him to his death, a struggle which was, of course, ineffectual in the face of the strength and weapons of the forces of public order of the State of Louisiana.

Now, the moment he dies, he's completely free of that whole game of power and victimization of which he was part, no longer is he struggling with those powers: he doesn't have to, for they have no dominion over him, they no longer affect him in any way at all. The resentment disappears completely, because resentment only has its place within that game. Let's stretch the fantasy a little more: since the powers of the law, of social custom, and so on, no longer affect him, our dead man can begin completely to restructure his imagination with respect to his previous experience of life in the State of Louisiana. For the first time he begins to see it from the perspective of one who is no longer resentful and pushed around by it. Perhaps he's not much interested by his former life, and heads off elsewhere, no longer weighed down by what he lived. But let us imagine that he does take an interest in Louisiana, in such a way that, now that he sees things with a certain clarity, he wants to help build a better, more just, State, so he becomes present to other people, people totally caught up, as we all are, in the reigning social, political, and economic structures, so as to help them understand what they are really doing in their way of leading their lives and their social belonging, so that, little by little, they begin to undo all that is sacrificial and resentful in all that, at every level, economic, social, military,

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<sup>1</sup>Paul John Nuechterlein, *Girardian Lectionary Commentary* (www.girardianlectionary.net).

religious, and begin to be able to live with the same freedom which he now enjoys.

Well, of course, the example is at least as misleading as it is useful, and that's why I've called it a fantasy. However it's a fantasy in the service of something which is not a fantasy, but a rather important theological point. When we speak of the risen Jesus speaking to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are talking about a dead man, totally free from resentment. For this reason he is not present as an accusation, seeking to avenge himself on his executioners, but as one who begins to make of the story of his life and death a way of opening the imagination of his disciples, offering a new interpretation of texts which they already knew, so that they, not yet dead, might begin to live from then on with the same lack of resentment, free as he is from being bound in by laws and sacrificial customs, aiming for the construction of a human way of being together not marked by the powers of death. [End quote]<sup>2</sup>

So, this morning, and any morning, any day or night, when we are joined along the road by the risen Christ, we are in the presence of a reality we can hardly get our minds around. We are guilty. We cannot help but be. How could we help but be? We are in this world where fear and resentment are only too real. We are products of systems of laws that say an eye for an eye is justice, that you pay for your crimes by suffering in turn. We live in a world where it is important to assign blame and punish the blameworthy. We live in a world where the means of righteousness are warfare. We live in a world where it's fine to say, I forgive, but I don't forget, which means no forgiveness at all. We live in a world where anger can be righteous. We live in a world where we carry our resentments as though they were sacred prizes. If I've been offended, if I've been overlooked, if I've been treated badly, if I haven't gotten my way, if my pride has been hurt, then I am justified to revel in my resentment. I am justified to be angry. I am justified to talk behind the back. I am justified to plot my revenge. I am justified to strike back. I am justified to hold a grudge. This is the world we live in.

This is the world the disciples were living in. Two of them were leaving Jerusalem. They were sorrowful and defeated. They were angry at Jesus, "We had thought he would be the one, but." But what? But he wasn't. He didn't live up to his billing. He was only too human. He couldn't even keep himself from getting crucified. And they were angry at the women, telling tales of seeing visions of angels. And they were angry at the insult to injury that now his body was missing. And in the backs of their minds, muddled in with the righteous anger, was recognition that they played at least a small part in the events from which they were running. For they ran then, too. They turned their backs. They protected their own skins. Of course, it was because there was no other option. And it was because Jesus had already failed them. They hadn't dropped their fishing nets to follow a loser, had they? But stirred in with the resentment was also a hint of guilt, nonetheless. Two disciples, leaving Jerusalem, full of resentment, sorrow, and even self-reproach, because they live in this world. And this world injures us, and this world tells us that when we're injured, we are to be resentful and angry, and when we're resentful and angry, it provides us no relief, and it tinges us with shame. Two disciples turning their back on Jerusalem, leaving town, it is fair to say, a mess, because they live in this world.

They are joined by the risen Christ, whom they do not recognize. Why is that? Is it because resurrected people look different. Probably not. After all, they thought he was an

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

ordinary man. Is it because God hid the fact from their eyes? Maybe? But what seems more likely is that they did not recognize Jesus because in the world they lived in they would have expected him to have acted differently. He would be angry at what had happened to him. He would have been angry at the world, at the authorities, at the unjust laws of the land. And he would have been angry at them. Where did you go? Why didn't you stay with me? Why didn't you help? Why are you running away? The Jesus they thought they knew, the Jesus who like them would have been formed by this world, would have been resentful, and he would have been blaming them for their failures.

Alison's story has it right. The marvel of the resurrection isn't that Jesus was brought back to life. It was that he was brought beyond life, that in his death and resurrection he was freed from the deadly mechanisms of this world. And he came to his disciples, unrecognizable at first, not simply to tell them that one day they too would be resurrected. He came to walk with them to let them know that even now they could begin to live freed from the ways of this world, the ways of resentment, righteous anger, and justified revenge.

That day, Jesus joined his two disciples on the road. He came in forgiveness, not to convict and punish them. He came to teach them and to show his love for them. Of course they didn't recognize him. But as they began to grasp who he was, they began to learn anew.

And then the most miraculous thing of all took place. As they began to understand what he told them and what they felt in the breaking of the bread, they came face to face with their own guilt, or better said, they came face to face with the way that their ways had been given to them by the world's ways. And instead of fear and defensiveness, they felt acceptance and forgiveness. And in that moment they could begin to see a new way of being, a way that they never could have thought of on their own and never could have pulled off on their own if they had thought of it. But because Jesus had conquered the world's resentment, because this walking dead man responded to them in direct contradiction to the world's ways, they themselves began to be freed, also.

"So, Dudley, you're a smart guy, right? Tell me, do you believe in a walking dead man?" Today I would more quickly say, "Yes, that's exactly what I believe in. Would you like me to tell you why?" Thanks be to God. Amen.