

Luke 2:41-52 (NRSV)

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Lost, Found; Beginning Foreshadows Ending

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Text: *Luke 2:41-52*

When I read the story of Jesus left behind in Jerusalem at twelve years old, I cannot help but think of it in contemporary terms. Indeed the story has some very familiar moments. Mary and Joseph find Jesus after looking for him for several days. Like all parents, they have been frantic. But there he is, safe and sound, impressing the teachers with his wisdom. Like my mother, Like I was as a parent myself, I'm afraid, to show her relief, Mary lifts her voice to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

I love it, don't you? He's a twelve year old child. They left him in the big city and headed home. "Child, why have you treated us like this?" My mind goes off into an imaginary conversation. Mary and Joseph are about to leave with Jesus. But around the corner comes the DSS social worker. "Wait a minute folks. Not so fast. You're Mary and Joseph?"

"Yes, that's right," says Joseph. "Joseph and Mary Christ."

"And that's your son there?"

"That's right. Jesus Christ."

The social worker glares at the couple. "So, when did you abandon your son?"

"Well, we didn't abandon him. We thought he was with other family members when we left."

"When was that?"

"Let's see," says Joseph, "I guess it was three days ago. We were gone a day when we realized he wasn't with us. Then another day to return. And we've been looking for him for a day. Yup, three days."

"Okay," says the social worker. "Let me get this straight. You didn't abandon your son. You just didn't realize he was missing for a full day. Then it took you two more days to find him. Is that right? And you didn't call the authorities; you just kept it to your self? Well, I'm afraid, Joseph and Mary, that you are unfit parents. We're going to have to take Jesus into protective custody and put him into a foster family. Maybe they won't lose him. Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Christ."

Well, of course, it didn't really happen that way. Mary and Joseph were spared the humiliation, and Jesus survived his childhood just fine. Then I got to wondering, what's this story doing in the Gospel anyway. We know precious little about Jesus' life. The Gospels don't give us many details. We know almost nothing about his growing up, except this story from when he was twelve. Why was this story alone preserved for posterity?

One thing you might notice is that Luke is a Gospel of lost and found. Things get lost and found all over the place in Luke. Luke gives us the lost sheep, the lost coin, and prodigal son—all lost, all found—to name a few. Jesus also raises children who have died, gives sight to those who have lost it, and tells the story of the Good Samaritan, who nurses the beaten man back to health. Things lost and things restored have a central place in the Gospel of Luke.

But what about Jesus getting lost. Does that fit in? Of course it does. Think of the ending of the story. Some twenty-plus years after today's story Jesus is once again in Jerusalem. The plot structure of the Gospel of Luke is essentially Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. As a child, he was there, and he was lost to those who loved him, not accidentally, for three days. Towards the end of the story those who love him most, his followers and his family, are in agony as they lose him again, this time to death on the cross.

In one sense the constant refrain of things lost and then recovered has been preparing us for this moment. Indeed, the loss of Jesus himself at twelve begins the pattern and foreshadows the end. Things lost. Things recovered. Jesus lost. Jesus recovered.

In a rather straightforward sense the Gospel means to reassure us of the resurrection, of Jesus' victory over death, of his restoration. From the beginning of the story we have seen the pattern repeat itself, says Luke. So it is in this final movement of the drama, it occurs again. Jesus who was lost is restored.

Beneath the surface, though, it gets even more interesting. It's not just that Jesus died and then rose. There is a strand that connects today's story and the ending of the Gospel even more deeply than the simple mechanism of loss and restoration. Jesus' parents lost Jesus. Like the social worker in my fantasy story implied, they abandoned Jesus, at least in some sense. At the very least, it was their fault. At the end of the story, Jesus' followers lose him, abandon him, and misunderstand him.

It is Luke who gives us the wonderful story that we use throughout the year for communion. It's Sunday morning, and two disciples are leaving Jerusalem. The previous Thursday evening, after they shared supper with him, they scattered when the authorities came after him. They watched things unfold in a kind of double-dismay. They were shocked at their own lack of courage. They were also incredulous that this man they thought would thunder in as a messiah turned out to be just a fragile man in the face of the Roman militia. He was a skinny, unremarkable prisoner. When they looked upon him, they wondered to themselves how they could have thought him the son of David.

Friday went by in a blur. Helplessness and fear kept them at a distance, but the pornographic nature of torture compelled their attention. Thankfully, it didn't last too long. He was buried as night fell. The next day, on Saturday they were immobilized by a combination fear and shock. But by the end of the day, they knew they needed to get out of town. They were recognizable as his followers. Some people had already noticed them on Thursday and Friday. But the real reason to leave was that they weren't his followers any longer. How could they have been so naive? For Goodness' sake, they had been people of the real world, fishermen and the like. They should have known better. Well, now they did know better.

So Sunday morning they put their few belongings in a sack and headed out of Jerusalem. For now they were simply leaving. There would be time later to put their lives back together, to be the laughing-stock back in their home towns, to try to get work again, even though they were known as the kind of people who would quit honest work and follow a kook out of town at the drop of a hat. It would be painful, no doubt. But for now there was a sort of numbness. Just leave town, one step at a time, going nowhere yet, just leaving was enough.

There are a million ways to abandon our faith. And here I don't mean abandoning belief, at least not as we often think of belief. Christianity was never meant to be a faith about believing the right things so God would be happy with you and then, as Brian McLaren would say, God

would save your butt. The believing that the Bible talks about is believing in something, trusting in something. Not getting the answer right on the cosmic quiz. It's not a game of my God's better than your God. No, believing in Biblical terms means trusting in something. And there are a million ways to do just what the disciples did, to lose our faith, to lose our trust.

Maybe in the face of hurt and anger we seduce ourselves to believe that our violence is righteous, or that vengeance is justified. Maybe in the complicated world of human diversity, we opt for the simple religious belief that condemns those who are different from us. It is, after all, much easier than accepting the unfamiliar. In the face of great economic disparity in our world and communities, maybe we say that people get what they deserve, which eliminates any further worry about either a cause or a solution to poverty. As the evidence mounts that we are headed to an environmental crisis, maybe we put our trust in the free market and technology to solve all the future's problems. When things at home or work are hard, maybe we turn to alcohol or to unfaithfulness. There are a million ways that we lose our faith, that we lose our trust in what is true and place it instead in illusory things. Like the two disciples, we find ourselves wandering aimlessly out of town.

If the story ended there, it would be fit material for the great tragic dramatists. It's a plot worthy of Shakespeare himself. King Lear, mad and bereft of everything that matters to him, all by his own missteps.

Thank God that's not the end of the story. In the Gospel of Luke things are lost, to be sure, but they are also found. The two disciples are joined by the risen Christ, and by nightfall their faith is restored, more than restored, it is finally made true. That is, they finally see what their constant losing of faith had caused them to miss time after time.

No matter how many times we get it wrong, no matter how far astray we have gone, the risen Christ walks beside us, hoping to catch our attention, hoping engage us in conversation, hoping to restore and enlarge our true faith. The unison introit we sing each week—come, come, whoever you are—has additional verses and the very next one goes: “Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.”

Now let me be clear. This is no license to lose our faith. It's not break the vows today because tomorrow it's all forgiven. It's not that at all. But what it is is this. When we are broken, walking around numb and in shock, having fallen to God knows what form of temptation or what hollow idol, the risen Christ is there, trying to help us find ourselves through finding him. In the story we read this morning, his parents found Jesus in the Temple conversing with the teachers. On the road to Emmaus, the risen Christ interpreted the scriptures for the two worn out disciples. So too, the risen Christ joins us and is looking to engage us in the right and generous interpretation of our scriptures and religious traditions. No matter where we have been, the Christ wants to find us and instruct us and give us the kind of faith in which we can truly place our trust. The risen Christ is here, right now. Just take his hand and listen to what he has to say. Come, yet again, come. Amen.