

And He Vanished

3 Easter, Year A, 4/23/23

The first draft of this story didn't go quite so well:

Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

— Mark 16:12–13

Just imagine: you meet someone who has come back from the dead – recognizably themselves, though “in a different form,” whatever that means – and no-one believes you. They didn't believe the women who came straight from the empty tomb when they said it, and they didn't believe the dudes who came in from the county, when they said it. “They?” The eleven apostles of Jesus who were left after Judas cashed his last paycheck, as it were. The next thing that happens in the Gospel of Mark is that Jesus comes among these eleven “as they sat at meat,” and it was only then that they believed.

There's a good lesson in that: if you want people to believe you, or believe in you, it's best to go to them in person, especially if you can do it by going through a wall.

You see, as we learned last week, there's something about hearing impossibly good news that makes us want to see for ourselves, not just take it on spec – I refuse to call believing things without evidence and good reason ‘an act of faith’, btw. – and that may also be true when hearing impossibly bad news. An article I found online while I was preparing this sermon claimed that life as we know it would come to an end last Thursday morning, at roughly 9:15 Pacific time, because of a solar storm. Now, solar storms can be quite damaging, and it is certainly possible that one of them might put us out of commission, but had I simply taken that article's particular claim as proved,

and not sought for corroborating evidence that proved, let us say, elusive, we'd have had no sermon to listen to this morning, and nothing to discuss except some lame reason why. But, if I am standing before you preaching this, and you are listening to it safe and sound in the pews or at home, it would appear that the clickbait was proved false, and that the world kept going through Thursday and after it, much as it has throughout our lives, though many things have changed, and much that we thought unlikely has come, for good and for ill, to pass.

Of course, if the world had ended on Thursday, and none of us were here listening to this, the joke would be on me, fool that I was, spending the last 24 hours of my and the earth's existence writing a sermon no-one would listen to instead of living, as the country song says, like I was dying. Perhaps the jokes on me either way; ought we not live like that anyway – live like we were dying? It's a powerful song, twang or no twang, and I can't listen to it all that often because of that power. In it, someone gets one of those diagnoses that all of us dread – it's malignant, and there's nothing we can do – yet when someone else asks what are you going to do, now? The response, "Live like I was dying." To paraphrase that song's chorus, should I, should we not 'love deeper, speak sweeter, give forgiveness I'd been denying'?¹ Of course we should, and we know it, even at our most mandarin and cynical. When we realize we only have a limited time to make a difference, we should be all the more committed to making that difference, and not waste another moment doing anything else, solar storm or no solar storm. As Eliot says in "The Dry Salvages," "Not farewell, but fare forward, voyagers." Just keep going, but do it better than you would have done, knowing that you don't have forever; no-one does, and if we're honest about it, none of us would really want to, not really. What is the Greek myth in which someone asks for, and receives, eternal life, but forgets

¹ Craig Michael Wiseman, James Timothy Nichols, & Tim Nichols, "Live Like You Were Dying" lyrics © BMG Rights Management, Warner Chappell Music, Inc. 2004. Online source: <https://genius.com/Tim-mcgraw-live-like-you-were-dying-lyrics>.

to ask for eternal youth? Be careful what you wish for, and when you think about asking the gods for something, maybe it's best to just leave it up to them.

I wonder if Cleopas and the other fellow were thinking thoughts like this – *carpe diem, vita brevis* – on that day when they left Jerusalem to walk the seven miles (back?) to Emmaus? A walk like that should take 2½ hours, give or take, though if you walk at my pace, it'll be more like three, and that's without stopping to smell the roses or the honeysuckle, which I recommend, or watch where those two deer are headed, or that groundhog on its wobbly way from nowhere to nowhere else, which I also recommend, s/he probably having mouths to feed with whatever it is groundhogs feed their young. Very likely they are. I always imagine that they're heading to Emmaus because that's home. They've spent a week or so in Jerusalem for Passover, death, and betrayal, and now it's time to leave.

All this and more was on their minds. Indeed, Luke shows us exactly how much by how he tells this story, greatly expanding on Mark's original. Why did they have to leave that particular Sunday morning (the one we call, now, Easter)? Well, the people who run their country had three days ago killed the person they thought would set them free from them. They and thousands like them had been in town for Passover, and the chief priests and elders and Romans and all killed their Jesus right in front of everybody, just to show everybody what happens when hope for the future runs into the sharp-edged iron of those who grip the present. Some of our people, Cleopas *et amie* say, even said they'd seen angels who told them Jesus was still alive, and his tomb is in fact empty for some reason, but no-one has seen him, not even those who saw the angels – which means that they don't really believe it, because if they did, they wouldn't have left town. If they gave any credence at all to the idea that Jesus was back, they'd not have left it for the world.

But leave they did, and bereft they are, hopeless, and heading home. It makes sense that they are still talking about it, still processing all that this loss and its grief will mean for them. Was this really the one, or just another we put hope in falsely, another mighta-been or shoulda-been who turns out not to have been much, in the end. Or did they think that this was it, Jesus had been the one, the Messiah they'd waited for, but it was all over now because the bad people got to him first, like they always do. Some such state of grief and loss is these two people's state of mind when they run into what presents as a clueless stranger to whom they, because he asks, reveal it all. Trusting souls – or is it that grief trumps prudence, as it so often does, as they confess to someone they don't know their loyalty to the innocent victim of judicial murder? Whatever it is, saying it out loud was not wise. Who knows whom the chief priests and elders have on their payroll? This very stranger could have been sent out looking for Jesus's followers so that the powers that be can do unto them as they've just done unto him. Maybe that's also why these guys are heading out. It wasn't just hope they watched die in Jerusalem, but safety, too. Their Messiah, their rabbi is dead; his killers live on. How, stranger, do you not know this?

Then the stranger leads them into, of all things, Bible study, proving that it all had to be this way if you know how to read those books correctly, and what good would a Messiah be, really, if they didn't have to suffer for it, through it, alongside the rest of us? The early Christians had to turn the Hebrew Bible upside-down and inside-out to make it read this way, but turn it they did, and read it that way they learned to, all because of what they came to realize salvation had to mean, and what someone would have to do to make salvation available to all. That had long been the dream; what was new here was the means. Once that's clear, once they get it, once the Good Book makes good sense again, he breaks bread with them and then he...vanishes. Of course he does. Mission accomplished; blessed are they who this week have seen what others saw and

believe now what others believe. Once you get that, the Risen Jesus is gone; only (!) the Spirit remains. It had been there all along, Cleopas *et amie* realize. Did our hearts not burn when he was with us on the road? they ask. Will they not be burning for a while now that we've seen him? He doesn't have to stay for us to know? Even a moment would've been enough, and we got four hours. Let's head back to town and tell the others. First light, we leave, and we tell them: it's real. All of it. He's back. Well, he's gone again, you know what he's like now, but what you all said is true: we're free. Let's tell everyone.

Skip a couple of chapters ahead to Acts 2, with which we began this morning, and Peter does. (The same dude that wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote Acts, and meant them to be read together. Really, we should read these things in order, but there is it. I forget who put the Gospel of John in the Bible between these two parts of the same scroll, but it happened way after this. John wasn't even in the first-draft stage when Luke was finished his two-volume series on *Why Jesus Matters*.) Anyway, in Acts 2, Peter, backed by the other surviving the, tells the whole city what it all means: you all nailed Jesus up there, or cried out to have others do it for you, but please understand: "God made him Lord and Messiah," and now we have to deal with that. Well, you do. We'll help?

So what do we have to do? the people ask. Repent, and be baptized. Your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive...think of it this way. You know how full of God's grace and truth Jesus was, how full of truth and healing and that charisma good people have that just makes you want to be better all the time, worthy of knowing them? You'll get that. You'll still be you, but different – better, even. Free. It turns out freedom isn't just not having chains on, be they of iron, debt, or fear. It means being free in your mind of what you're afraid of or can't forget, and free in your soul of all you've done wrong and all you might do wrong tomorrow. You'll find you have words to speak you didn't know you had, truths to share and to shout you hadn't imagined, and a spirit that wants to

change the world for the better, and do it every day. That spirit is his, it's him – and it's holy. It's of God, and it sets us apart from what we were, and it's amazing. And to get it, all you have to do is want to. He said this, Peter did, and three thousand said 'I want to' that very day, and meant it.

“Save yourself from this corrupt generation,” he also said, and those three thousand said they wanted that, too. How might we say that more positively? To quote 1st Peter, “Live in fear during the time of your exile,” which doesn't sound all that positive, but it is wise. Can we do better? 1st Peter again: “Have genuine mutual affection, love one another deeply from the heart.”

That is, in a phrase, “love deeper, speak sweeter, give the forgiveness you've been denying.”

That is: live like you were dying.

After all, they did – and so did He. *Amen.*