The Road to Emmaus

A few weeks ago, my husband and I celebrated my birthday outside of a restaurant in the city. Yep, outside, on a sidewalk. We pretended we had not completely lost our minds while we broke bread⎯ en plein air⎯ at near-freezing temperatures, wearing six layers, racing to devour the food before it turned cold, teeth chattering between courses, wondering why we were paying money for this grand experience. This is so fun! Happy Birthday!!

On our walk back to the car, in need of a lesson in humility and gratitude, we found ourselves in front of last year’s birthday-restaurant-of-choice. We reflexively paused… both in reverence to that long-ago experience of sitting inside a restaurant and leisurely conversing while enjoying hot food, ambient temperatures, and the smiles and facial expressions of those around us, and in silent awe of the three hundred and sixty-five days we had just survived, endured, witnessed, walked. A year ago, we took the train home from the restaurant in front of which we were now standing, closed the front door behind us, and the world shut down.

Reflecting on all of these events, I have found myself drawn to Luke 24 and the story of the two apostles on the road to Emmaus. On Easter Sunday, Christ’s resurrection day, two of His disciples were walking away from Jerusalem. Jesus was dead. They had watched him die. Now the tomb was empty, and he was not there. They were confused, and distraught. And even though they had given up everything to follow Jesus, now they were *walking away*. Just as Jesus had predicted before His death, His disciples were beginning to scatter.

But then Jesus meets them⎯ right where they are⎯ in the midst of their questioning and grief. He went seven miles out of his way to get to them. “Tell me,” He says. “Why are you troubled? Why do you doubt?”

This past year our world collectively experienced a previously unfathomable loss of life, a raw awakening to racial and ethnic divisiveness, and unexpected financial devastation; it appropriately responded with a gravitas of emotion I have never seen.

I am a palliative care physician. As such, I am often called to walk alongside the dying. My days are usually comprised of sharing really bad news, sitting with my patients and their families as they process that news, and then helping them find a way through the darkness to a place where we can determine how best to care for them… given what they just heard, for whatever time they have left. The darkness over this past year has been staggering. There has been so much bad news, so much hopelessness, so much death. Family members rocking back and forth, sobbing into each other’s arms, wailing, writhing, irreparably wounded. Over and over and over again. Every day. All day. For a year.

Our intensive care unit clinicians have struggled with why they keep doing things to patients when the end result seems always to be the same: death. Our patients and families question if we were doing everything we can for them. “Don’t you have anything more? Isn’t there something else?” I have desperately wanted to know when I could look into the eyes of a patient and not know they would be dead in three days, or seven, or ten. Defeat has been everywhere.

So many days I have driven home from my hospital questioning His goodness. How many times in this year have we been tempted to *walk away* because we can’t explain what is happening? This isn’t how it is supposed to go. Truth doesn’t look like this. Have we believed a lie?

But He never promised us ease. He never said we wouldn’t grieve. He doesn’t hand out a pain-free existence. In fact, a life following Jesus is a life defined by sacrifice and hard choices and grief as much as it is defined by exquisite joy and tenderness and gratitude. What He promised us was His presence. Jesus may not show up in the way we think He should or we wish He would, but He always shows up. He promised us that He will never leave us or forsake us. He offers us Himself, all of Him, His very *life*. Every day. All day. Forever.

The empty tomb was the source of the disciples’ confusion and grief. Jesus was gone and they didn’t understand. But as only He can do, He turned their mourning into dancing. Jesus was right there with them. The empty tomb wasn’t defeat, it was victory over death and darkness. It is the reason we believe that Jesus is who He said He was; it is the promise fulfilled. The empty tomb is now the source of our courage and our conviction, even in the midst of our doubts and our questions. Even in the midst of our agony and defeat.

A week after my birthday dinner, the weather turned. The sun shone brilliantly, the temperature rose significantly, and our hospital’s census suddenly dropped. Instead of every bed in our intensive care unit holding the life of a patient with COVID, it became every other, and then half of that. The national daily death toll from COVID began to drop as well, and the middle school two blocks away from our home turned into a vaccination drive-through center. A few days ago, our daffodils started to break through the ground, and my orchid opened its first flower. I am beginning to look forward to things again, my body is starting to exhale.

It is the season to celebrate The Risen Christ. He never left us, even in the darkness, even in the desperation, even when we turned to walk away, even after His death. He was, and always has been, right here: walking alongside us, meeting us where we are and where we need Him, asking us to share ourselves with Him.

Truth is Truth, even now, today, after this year. It remains steadfast, as He promised, as He proved. Praise God, it is Easter.

*“In the waiting, in the searching
In the healing and the hurting
Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces
Every minute, every moment
Where I've been and where I'm going
Even when I didn't know it or couldn't see it
There was Jesus.”*

*There Was Jesus, Zach Williams and Dolly Parton*