

“Slow of Heart”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, April 26, 2020

Luke 24

In 1807, William Wordsworth wrote these words in a poem about his heart’s response to nature: “My heart leaps up when I behold/A rainbow in the sky:/So was it when my life began; So is it now I am a man.” The heart can do so many things. It can leap for joy at the sight of a rainbow, or be cold as stone, or broken in two. It can tremble like a leaf, or burst with joy. And in today’s gospel, we read that we can be ‘slow of heart’.

Cleopas and a friend are walking the long road to Emmaus, having left Jerusalem behind them. Every step is growing heavier and heavier as they walk away from that horrendous scene of Jesus’ death, nailed to a cross. They are desolate. Their hearts are empty. The hope and promise and joy they associated with their friend Jesus evaporated when he died. He was supposed to be a King. It was supposed to be so different.

They are joined on the road by the risen Jesus, although they do not recognize him. And they say to him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” That was a long seven-mile road that stretched out before them and behind them. And every step of that road felt like a nail in their own coffin.

In the last few months, and into the foreseeable future, most of the world seems to be walking a similar long road, a road that connects all of us as we walk in fear, in weariness, in frustration. We are all walking a seven- mile road. And this week in Canada, we are walking with Nova Scotia down their long road of terrible grief and sorrow at the senseless murders of so many in their community.

Cleopas and his friend walk down the seven-mile road, and are joined by Jesus, but they do not recognize him. When they explain to him all that had happened in Jerusalem, he jumps into the conversation with this, “Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart.” How slow of heart. It’s easy to be slow of heart when you’re on the seven-mile road.

Then Jesus does something rather peculiar. He says to Cleopas and the friend, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” And still they did not recognize Jesus. As the gospel goes, they come to a parting of ways, and the two disciples ask the stranger to join them for a meal. “When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

How do we get from ‘slow of heart’ to ‘burning hearts’? Their hearts were burning when they heard Jesus opening up the scriptures to them while they walked along that seven-mile road. Their hearts were burning when they heard the Word. As Henri Nouwen writes, “Luke doesn’t write, “Then it dawned on them” or “Then they saw the light.” No, he says: “Their hearts burned within them.” Nouwen continues, “The burning heart revealed something completely new to Cleopas and his friend. At the centre of their being, of their humanity, something was generated that could disarm death and rob despair of its power; something much more than a new outlook on things ... something that can be described only as a new life or a new spirit.”¹

What got them from ‘slow of heart’ to ‘burning hearts’ was the Word. And not any word, but the Word that we call scripture, the word that has lifted up and continues to lift up those who let the word enter their hearts, and in that moment of centeredness in the word, begin to understand that here is a truth that will guide them well; here is a truth that surely leads, even in death, to new life. No other Word can do this.

Jesus opens up the scriptures, from Moses through to the prophets, as they walk along the seven-mile road. And the Word is opened up to them. It becomes a living word to them. Henri Nouwen reflects on what he calls the ‘sacrament of the word’: “How does God come to me as I listen to the word? Where do I discern the healing hand of God touching me through the word? How are my sadness, my grief, and my mourning being transformed at this very moment? ... These questions lead me to the sacrament of the word, the sacred place of God’s real presence.”²

How do I explain what a living word is to someone? Could I say its living because it’s the same word that was spoken to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebecca, to Jacob and Leah, to Isaiah and Jeremiah, to David and Solomon, to Peter and to Paul, to St. Francis³, and to Martin Luther King Jr, and to me, and to you?

How do I explain a living word? When the Word lands in your soul, do you stamp it out like an ember on the floor, saying, ‘Go away, I don’t want to be bothered today?’ Or does that word make its way into your innermost self, and cause your soul to jump? Cause your mind to race? Quicken your heart? So that you are no longer ‘slow of heart’ but have a ‘burning heart’? Have you ever had a burning heart because of a Word you heard from the pulpit, or in reading, or in prayer, or in the middle of the night? And what do you do when you have a ‘burning heart’?

A friend emailed me while I was writing this sermon. He was telling me about the oncology report he received that day. He ended his email with the words, ‘Help me hoping.’ We read and see the pictures of those killed cruelly in Nova Scotia. We think of the thousands and thousands who have died around the world from a virus that has been unstoppable.

The burning heart is an active heart, a heart that responds with tears and grief, as well as moments of hope and calm. The burning heart is one that gives of itself, that opens up to encompass more. The burning heart helps others to hope. Because the burning heart knows how that hope is given – because we are on the other side of the resurrection. A theologian asked,

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Jesus – A Gospel* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 124.

² Henri Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 47.

³ Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts*, 49.

“What difference does a Risen Saviour’s claim make?”⁴ It makes all the difference in the world. For now, when there was only death, now there is new life. Hope appears as a truly living thing, bringing clarity to the heart, and peace to the mind.

In this time of pandemic, in this time of National mourning, as you walk along that seven-mile road, steps weary, hearts low, struggling to understand the why of everything, the living Word walks beside you. And Jesus says to you, I have always been with you and I am with you now. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, Homiletical Perspective, 419.