

A Bigger Story and You're In It

Luke 24:13-35

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's on April 26, 2020

Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus are having a similar conversation to the ones you and I are having on a daily basis right now. They are processing a tragedy while they are still in the middle of that tragedy. He tells us what theirs is: Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, the one who they hoped would redeem all of Israel, was crucified three days ago. But the narrative is not stable; the story is still evolving—now his body has gone missing. And they are even in this moment sorting through competing explanations for the empty tomb received from a variety of sources: some say they saw a vision of angels, some say Jesus has been raised from the dead, some even claim to have seen him in the flesh, others ranged from doubtful to dismissive—but no one has no opinion. The whole world is talking about it. “Are you the only person who does not know what has happened in these days?”

It is funny—even if dangerous to the public health, and even if nonetheless personally enviable—to imagine who out there could be living in blissful ignorance of this coronavirus. A rancher in the depths of the Australian outback perhaps? Maybe the International Space Station stalled out on the dark side of the moon two months ago and no one has noticed yet. Honestly, I'm pretty sure even my dog, Watson, knows. He stares at us throughout the day, saying with his eyes, “Look, I love you, but your constant presence is seriously interfering with my circadian rhythms of 18+ hours of sleep per day.”

The whole world is talking about it. It feels like we are now living inside this tragic story of the coronavirus. It is bending every other story to fit within its own contours. And it is very much a still-evolving story too. Every business now feels like a startup. Every future plan we once made now feels like fantasy. Our horizon is filled with unknowns. We find ourselves longing for things that we were complaining about just mere weeks ago. Was Austin traffic really that bad after all? Was my job really so boring or my co-workers really so annoying? Did I really miss my children *that much* while they were away at school for those 8 hours? We just want things to get back to normal.

If you read this story carefully, there are hints that suggest Cleopas and his companion also just wanted things to get back to normal. Presumably they're from Emmaus. They had first come to Jerusalem, along with tens of thousands of others, for the Passover festival. Maybe they were even in the crowds during Jesus' triumphal entry. Certainly they had heard about the potential political and cultural revolution many expected this Jesus character to introduce. Whether or not they believed him to be the Messiah, they at least had hope that this Jesus could make some kind of meaningful difference for their lives.

But the thing is, at this moment, though it sounds like they're still sorting through various interpretations of this tragic event in their minds, the truth is their bodies have already decided which angle they are taking. They're walking back home to Emmaus. Notice, *they* didn't go see the empty tomb for themselves. They say “some of those who were with us” told us. And how did they respond to that news? Was that intriguing enough for them to go investigate themselves? No. Was it disappointing to them that Jesus died? Yes, obviously. They had hopes

that he would be the one to redeem Israel. But was Jesus raised from the dead? Well obviously not. So best we get on with it and take our disappointment back home with us so things can eventually return to normal again. Normal may have not been all that great; but at least it was normal. That's all they wanted then. It's all we want now.

That is, until the risen Jesus begins to speak. What Jesus says to these travelers on the road to Emmaus is the same thing Jesus says to us who are on a similar journey 2,000 years later.

The text says this: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." The first thing Jesus is saying to them and to us is this: This story is much bigger than you think it is. I know this current tragedy feels all-consuming; that heartache and anxiety is filling your body to the brim, but what if I told you that what is happening now is only one chapter of a much longer story—that it has a beginning set long, long before Jesus entered Jerusalem one week ago.

One simple point to make here is that this is not the first time the people of God have faced a pandemic. Admittedly, this, it could be said, is not a very helpful point to make given that the last one was over 100 years ago and none of us were there. But it is true nonetheless. And I think consoling in some way to recognize that, without in any way skipping over the very real fear and pain many are and will experience in our community, the church has suffered plagues and wars and exiles and tyrants and has always emerged, by God's grace, still standing on the other side. The church is one organization that is not a start-up.

The more important point to take from what Jesus says is not a backward looking one but a future looking one. Jesus is also saying, not only does this story have a beginning long before you thought it did—but also, this, what's happening right now, is not the end. There's another ending still to come. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into glory?" What if I told you that if you take a step back and look at the whole story together, even though this chapter is undeniably a tragedy, the bigger story is a comedy. The bigger story has a happy ending. That ending is called the consummation of all things, when Christ shall return and all wrongs shall be made right and we shall see God face to face and dwell together in paradise forever.

It is in this light that we must consider again our desire to go back to normal. The simple truth is this: Never does Jesus at any point in the Gospels—never does God in any point in the Bible—appear to have any interest in things "going back to normal." Jesus interrupts this journey to Emmaus to keep precisely that from happening. For Christians, what is normal is broken. Broken by sin, individual and corporate; disaster, personal and epic. And God's solution to that brokenness is never to try to get us back to the garden of Eden. To squeeze us back into some pre-sin state. What we see in Jesus is God entering into our brokenness and using that brokenness to redeem us. This is what is happening on the cross. We tried to kill God, and God used even that to save us. God is always looking into the future. The drama of the Christian life comes from how God sews all the brokenness from our past and present into the new and beautiful tapestry of our redemption. God's future is literally made out of our past. Nothing is wasted. That is what happens in the course of our individual lives all the time. We go through horrible, awful things. Things God did not cause. But things that God nonetheless uses to make us grow more into his image.

Things are not going to return to normal any time soon. And we will talk about the implications of that reality for our community very soon. But just because this coronavirus is bigger than other tragedies does not mean that it is in principle any different than all the other bad things that happen to us. It is a bad, awful, terrible thing. God did not cause it. But God will not waste it. This week Casey sent out an activity for families that encouraged them to make three lists on three separate sheets of paper. The first was for “What the coronavirus has taken away from us.” The second is for “What the coronavirus can’t take away from us no matter what.” And the third is “What unexpected gifts have we found in this time of the coronavirus.” I commend this exercise to everyone. That this story has an ultimately happy ending is something no virus can take away. And I truly believe that one of the gifts inside of this tragic moment, is that we are now faced with a once-in-a-century opportunity to deeply and widely reconsider what we want our future to really look like, as people, as Christians, as a church, and as a society.

In closing, let me say this: You can believe and even be consoled by everything I have said so far, by all of this talk about a bigger story that has a happy ending and still not recognize that it is Jesus himself that is right in front of you. That is what happens to Cleopas. The moment on which the whole story turns is not whether or not Cleopas correctly understands how to read the Bible and his current moment in history. The story turns on his decision to invite this interesting stranger into his house for a meal. And it is there, in the breaking of the bread, that he realizes he has come face to face with his risen Lord.

We are not, for the moment, to be inviting interesting strangers into our homes for a meal. But the significance of Cleopas’s epiphany runs deeper than that he was one of the lucky ones to meet the risen Jesus. The significance is that he now sees that this story includes him. This story that begins with the creation of the world, this story of God’s faithfulness to a people through generations of exile, the story of deliverance from sin and death, is all pointed at him.

Are your hearts not burning within you? This—this story about Jesus—is the biggest story of them all. And you’re in it. It is all pointed at you.

Amen.