

“High Noon’ and Emmaus At Supper”

Luke 24:13-35

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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Ted V. Foote, Jr.

A few days ago at 4:30 in the afternoon, I walked south along the sidewalk on the Carter Creek Parkway side of the church. No cars were driving past. No birds could be heard singing, no dogs barking, no squirrels chattering. There was no wind or breeze. A person could almost “hear” the stillness. Then the stillness was broken by the cooing of a mourning dove. I recognized the sound and looked around. The cooer was staring in my direction from its perch across the street on the elevated power line in front of the Women’s Club building.

In the loneliness of loss and grief, when one feels jarred in the midsection and unable to breath, when legs and arms are weak with no feeling of strength, and when the mind is blank and numb, one may recall the words and/or tune of a favorite song or hymn.

It might be Thomas Dorsey’s “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” That one has certainly been the favorite of many. During the 1968 funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahalia Jackson sang “Precious Lord.” During the 1972 funeral of Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin sang “Precious Lord.” During the 1973 funeral of former President Lyndon Johnson, Leontyne Price sang “Precious Lord.”

When editor, author, university professor, Mississippi native, and University of Texas alumnus Willie Morris wrote of his father’s memorial service in the Methodist Church of Yazoo, Mississippi during the early 1960s, he commented that “Abide With Me” was “the finest hymn of them all.” [*North Toward Home*, p.56]

Thomas Dorsey wrote “Precious Lord” in 1932. Henry Lyte wrote “Abide with Me” sometime between 1820 and 1847. Both Dorsey and Lyte wrote their respective song’s lyrics when experiencing profound grief.

On the Sunday afternoon after Jesus’ crucifixion the previous Friday, two of his disciples felt numbing, draining grief as they walked away from Jerusalem and toward Emmaus. A stranger joins them on that road. When he asks, they tell him why they are downcast. Referring to the Scriptures, he speaks with them about a suffering death being one part of the radical experience of God’s Messiah. When they arrive at their Emmaus-destination, they implore him to abide with them for supper. He agrees, and when, at table, he breaks a piece of bread, they recognize the stranger as Jesus Christ, alive in resurrection-power! Immediately he is invisible, as quickly as he became visible to them earlier in the afternoon.

I do not know what each of you have experienced in profound grief, nor what your favorite scriptures, poems, songs, or hymns of comfort are. I do not know how you have personally experienced God’s strength and presence reinforcing you when one or more of those whom you’ve appreciated and loved have died. I do not know how you have experienced God’s strength and presence when agonizing trouble has developed.

The story told in chapter 24 of Luke, however, addresses more than the inertia and despondency of sorrow.

In 1952, Tex Ritter sang the theme song of the movie, “High Noon”: “Do Not Forsake Me, Oh, My Darling.” Gary Cooper’s character, Marshall Will Kane, is marrying Grace Kelly’s character, Amy, who is a Quaker and a pacifist. The Marshall, with his fire arms, feels a responsibility to defend the town against the Miller brothers’ gang who are arriving on the train at high noon. Amy begs him to put down the guns as instruments of violence, which she abhors; thus the entreating theme song: “Do not forsake me, oh, my darlin’, on this, our wedding day. . . I’m not afraid of death, but, oh, what shall I do, if you leave me?”

Two unarmed and grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus who are surprised at who’s picked them up along the way / who has joined them rather than abandoned them, and Sheriff Will Kane worrying about being abandoned by his pacifist new bride. These three may have more in common that we initially think.

Biblical archaeologists do not know the location of the town which Luke calls Emmaus. It’s supposedly near Jerusalem in one direction or another. Let’s simply say that those disciples were going someplace, but if Emmaus is where they were going, it’s no place we can determine. Emmaus can be anywhere. Emmaus can be everywhere.

One disciple is named Cleopas; the other is unnamed. As Emmaus can always be wherever you are or wherever I am, the other disciple can always be you or me. And as the Resurrected Jesus mysteriously catches up with two disciples in grief who are hiking, this One can catch up with you and me and all others anywhere, anytime, and does. This One catches up with us in both the inertia of despondency and grief, and also in the thick of the hard work which is life: be it loving or fighting, planting or harvesting, paying bills, studying, worrying, forgiving, sacrificing.

We realize we’ve been “caught up with” not when we’re telling The Stranger how tough life has been, although we’re permitted to do that. We realize we’ve been “caught up with” and we realize Who has caught up with us when, in an ordinary, every day, every week, every month act something “clicks”: Something as ordinary as reading and interpreting the stories of Scripture; something as ordinary as experiencing bread broken and shared and the liquid of the pitcher poured.

Cleopas’ eyes were opened, and he recognized Jesus Christ, right there. And so were the eyes opened of the unnamed disciple, who would be you and I, in the midst of grief or worry or pressure. The unnamed disciple whose name can be yours and it can be mine, also recognized Jesus Christ, who had not forsaken the world or the people in it back then and there: Because any time, any where, amid hard work, gut-wrenching decisions, deep sadness, and stomach-acid anxiousness, Christ is present. It’s a mystery as to how it happens, but it’s a mystery which encourages and empowers persons, even you and me, when the realization clicks within.

-- All honor and praise be to God.