

“Stay with Us”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
*For a Memorial Service to which bereaved families
served by Elora-Bethany during the past year were invited.*

Luke 24.13-35

November 15, 2015

“*Stay with us.*” Do they mean it? Inviting the Stranger in is the right thing to do. It is late. (I love how the King James translation says the day was “*far spent.*”) In those parts, travelling at night is risky. So they give hospitality to the Stranger.

But, are their hearts in it? They are “far spent” too. And many of us know what it is to be “far spent” in our own hearts.

I

They just wanted to get home. After all the worry, terror, tears and confusion . . . when we’ve lost much, we want to get home. Home is the promise of safety and familiarity, where everything is normal. But now, after all this, can we go home? Even when we are in that place, home no longer feels like it. (You know how it is.)

They did not ask the Stranger to join their conversation. He just showed up and stepped in, into the middle of their grief. It’s like when you have to go get some groceries, and hope that no one notices you. Then you hear, “*Hey! Haven’t seen you in a while. How are things?*” You can’t run, so you hide behind a plastic face.

(You know Jesus was the Stranger in this story, but they did not. “*Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*” “*Were kept,*” it says. As if some unseen hand was pulling down their blinds. God was at work, hiding from them that it was Jesus. For they were not ready to see, not yet.¹ Sometimes we are not meant to see something, to understand it, until we are ready for it. So, while we know, for their sake let’s pretend we do not.)

The Stranger wondered what was going on. They are astonished at his ignorance: “*Are you the only one who does not know?*” When you are consumed by such a storm as they were, the thought that anyone could be sailing by unknowingly. . . . Yes, you know that life goes on. But you do not feel it.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, Luke. Interpretation commentary series (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 285.

I think of W. H. Auden's poem, *Funeral Blues*. Listen to these parts of it.

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead . . .
. . . Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.²*

The death of one so love demands that all else stop too. How can anything go on? Least of all, you?

"Tell me," the Stranger invited them. Counselling 101: get them to tell their story.

So they told all about their friend Jesus. From the beginning: "*a prophet mighty in deed and word.*" To the end: "*condemned to die and crucified.*" From their expectation, crushed: "*we had hoped that he was the one to redeem . . .*" To their despair, now confused by rumours of angels, an empty tomb, and whispers of resurrection. They tell their story.

Counselling 102: do not tell someone who has just unburdened their pain that they are "thick-headed" and "slow-hearted."³ Apparently the Stranger skipped that class.

But then the Stranger who had seemed to know nothing, told them everything. How all they had experienced in Jesus, all the wonder and all the despair, makes sense of everything. How everything in Scripture, the sacred story of God's people, has now been bound together in Jesus. How everything that is, and was, and ever will be—including all who we have lost—is now held in Jesus.

II

So when they invite him in for the night, maybe it is more than politeness. "*They urged him strongly.*" Are their broken hearts grasping for more of this Stranger, who somehow has

² <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/auden.stop.html>. Excerpts are the 1st stanza, lines 1-2 of the 2nd, and lines 3-4 of the 4th.

For more about the poem, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral_Blues

³ From Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of Luke 24:25.

what they need most? (Do you now how that is?)

They have been away and it is too late for shopping, but they do have bread. It is enough. All is quickly set, and they all sit. Yet before they can say grace, this Stranger-Guest makes himself the host. The bread he takes, blesses and breaks, and gives.

And they see. The blinds are lifted and their eyes open. God is at work.

Now, they see into their memory of that Last Supper a few days before, which—it's obvious now—was not the final meal with Jesus. That Supper, when he had likewise taken, blessed and broken, and gave, and said, *"This is my body, for you. Do this and remember me."*

Now they remember him. Not as we remember one who is lost and absent. No, it's memory that recognizes someone who is right there with us: *"I remember you! . . . Stranger . . . my Jesus."*

Though this time, he says nothing. He is gone.

They race back. Into the dangerous dark, but they are now alight. Along the same road they had just trudged, but this time they dance. Their heavy hearts now fully aflame with a fire that had been combusting ever since the Stranger had interrupted their conversation and stepped into their sorrow.

They race back, eager to join the rising chorus: *"The Lord has risen indeed!"*

III

In a bit, we will come to this table, and something will happen. I cannot explain it. I do not understand it. Somehow, Jesus is here. I guess if he can rise from the dead, after being crucified no less, he can be wherever he wants to be.

Jesus wants to be here. With us. With you.

He steps into your sorrow. He listens to your story. And with Jesus, maybe there will be some sense. Not that he will make everything all neat and tidy. He does not take us around the valley of the shadow of death, but he does walk with us through it. With him, as we walk together, we might see enough, and come to trust him enough, to become assured that it all does fit, that he binds and holds everything. That whatever and whoever has been lost to us, is found in him.

Jesus is here. In the bread. Bread that is broken! In the cup. Life that is poured out!

May God lift up our eyes, that we may behold Jesus here. As we do this in remembrance of him, may God give us that memory of recognition: *"I remember you! . . . Stranger . . . my Jesus."*

May God send us racing along the road and into the night—yes, a road that is still long, and a night that is still dark and cold—yet may God send us racing along with the rising chorus: *"The Lord has risen indeed!"*