

THIN PLACES

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Grace Church in New York
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While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (Luke 24:15-16)

On this day when we launch the public phase of our capital campaign, entitled *Lift up thine Eyes*, I am remembering a trip that I took to England many years ago. I was traveling alone through Cambridgeshire and came upon a small village called Hemingford Abbots. The tall spire of St. Margaret's Church was visible from some distance away, so I made my way towards it. Surrounding the church were the ancient headstones of long-dead parishioners. The November day was strangely warm and sunny so the main doors of the church were propped wide open. Thus, with grave markers still in sight I was able to see straight up the nave aisle to the altar itself.

I went inside and noticed immediately a large clear glass window between the nave and narthex. On the window were many intricate engravings, among them the words: *A thousand ages in thy sight are but as yesterday*. As I wandered around the tiny church I learned that some years earlier the congregation had installed the window to celebrate a remarkable anniversary. They and their ancestors had sung the praises of God on the same parcel of land for a thousand years. It was in 974 that King Edgar granted a charter for the church to be built. The stone building there today is 850 years old. I could scarcely imagine all the Sunday services, weddings, and funerals that had taken place under ceiling over my head. The baptismal font, still in use today, dates from the 13th century. How many babes in arms had been marked as Christ's own forever in its waters? How many hymns and choral anthems had been sung from the choir stalls? How many sermons had been preached from the pulpit? How many flower festivals and Christmas pageants had they enjoyed? They are a community of people moving through time, and this is their vessel. In it they had survived Viking raids, William the Conqueror, the Black Death, the Reformation, and untold wars, famines, pestilences, and plagues. Best of all, they are still at it.

I am not a mystic. I am not inclined to visions of angels or voices from heaven. But as I stood beneath the clear glass window, between the church yard and the altar, I knew in my soul that surely, this was none other than the gate of heaven. This is what Celtic Christians would call a "thin place" in the veil between heaven and earth.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35) we hear of another thin place where heaven and earth intermingled, overlapped, and seemingly occupied the same place at the same time. I refer, of course, to the well-known story we call *The road to Emmaus*. Luke tells us of two travelers who in the afternoon of the first Easter Day were walking from Jerusalem to the small town of Emmaus, a distance of about seven miles. It's unclear who exactly they were. One was named Cleopas, the other is unnamed. It could be that Cleopas was the same person as Clopas, mentioned in the Gospel of John (19:25) as the husband of one of the Marys who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus. If so, then it's entirely plausible that the other traveler was Mary. In the end we can only speculate on their identity.

What Luke does make clear is their despair and disillusionment. They had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They had hoped that through Jesus, the fortunes of Israel would finally change. Just a week earlier on Palm Sunday it all seemed to be coming together. Jesus had triumphantly entered Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna. Perhaps these two were among the jubilant

crowd with palm branches in their hands. Then, just as quickly, it all came to a devastating end when the Romans crucified Jesus as an enemy of the state. What a disappointing difference a week had made. Now rumors were afoot that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb, and the Romans wouldn't like that at all. It was time to clear out of town.

While they were walking and talking about these things, they could scarcely have imagined what was about to happen. Luke tells us that *Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him*. In trying to describe the resurrection appearance of Jesus, both Luke and John agree on a puzzling detail in their narratives – a detail that for us may prove edifying to reflect upon. The risen Jesus wasn't immediately recognizable. On the road to Emmaus the two travelers mistook him for another traveler. At the tomb on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener (John 20:15). At the Sea of Galilee the disciples mistook him for another fisherman (John 21:4). The risen Jesus had a body that still bore the wounds of crucifixion. He ate fish and breathed air. Yet he appeared in rooms where the doors were locked. He came and went without regard for time and space. He was the same, yet different. What did he look like? Luke and John struggle for language to describe the experience of meeting him. Perhaps we might add the words thin and translucent to the lexicon describing the risen Jesus: thin not as in skinny, but thin as in translucent. It seems that Jesus himself was a thin place in the veil between heaven and earth. He possessed a translucence between the two.

We heard Luke describe how only at dinner that night, when Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke, did the two travelers finally recognize him. Their eyes were opened, and Jesus vanished from their sight. Really? How did he do that? Did he give them a head fake and then duck under the table? That's the first place I would have looked: under the table. Or did he simply dematerialize before their eyes? We don't know. Luke didn't know. The two travelers didn't know. What they did was rise immediately and rushed all the way back to Jerusalem where they found the disciples and told them what had happened. The next two verses in Luke that follow today's reading are worth noting: *As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit*. Once again, they didn't readily recognize him, but it really was him. The Lord had risen, indeed.

I don't know about you, but whenever I read stories in the Bible like the road to Emmaus, once I set aside my initial disbelief, if I'm not careful I can detect a certain level of spiritual envy arising in me. As Christians, our faith depends entirely on Easter Day. If Jesus didn't really and substantially overcome death and the grave, then everything falls apart. Very well, then. Where is the Easter experience for us? One of the fun things I get to do is teach 5th Grade Bible over at Grace Church School. A happy coincidence this spring is that Easter coincides with when our syllabus has us looking at the resurrection narratives. A student asked this week why these things don't happen today. I tried to explain that the surprise and fear and confusion that the first resurrection witnesses expressed suggest that they weren't used to angels sitting up in their soup as a matter of course. The resurrection was as extraordinary for them as it would be for us. But the question remains: why them and not us? How can we encounter Jesus in such a way that our hearts burn within us? How can we shout "The Lord is risen indeed," not just because the phrase is printed in the bulletin, but as a result of being in his living presence?

Allow me to suggest that on the road to Emmaus we can detect a pattern of Christian practice for opening the eyes of our faith to see Jesus. In fact, I want to be so bold as to say that what happened on the road to Emmaus is the same thing that's been going on under the roof of St. Margaret's Church, Hemingford Abbots. What is more, it is the same thing we practice beneath the ceiling of Grace Church. I will be even more translucent in saying that the reason we need to restore the ceiling above us is to perpetuate the practice of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus.

What was their practice? They did four things by which they stumbled into a thin place between heaven and earth.

First, two of them were walking and talking together. What this says to me is that Jesus makes himself known to us when, with another person, we engage in honest discussion, questioning, exchange of opinion, and speculation about who God is, who we are, and what it all might mean. I think of all the pastoral visits, classes, youth groups, meetings, and coffee-hour conversations that occur under this ceiling. Jesus said (Matthew 18:20), “*Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.*” And on the road to Emmaus, *while they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.*

Second, the two travelers met Jesus because they welcomed the stranger. *Stay with us*, they said. I think of all the ways that we try to welcome the stranger to come in under this ceiling. Keeping the building open to the public for the better part of the day is our primary mission. All sorts and conditions of people want to come inside off Broadway, but only if we’re open can we extend the hand of friendship. In the campaign video that we will debut immediately following the 11 am service today you’ll hear the story of how a family came here in a time of need, found a welcome, and have become part of the community because of it. We read in Hebrews (13:2): *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Third, the two travelers on the road to Emmaus met Jesus because they opened themselves to the Scriptures. *And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.* What this says to me is that Jesus makes himself known through the Bible and our study of it. I think of all the ways the Bible is at the heart of our life at Grace Church. We read from the Scriptures at every worship service, discern their meaning through classes and sermons, and bask in the light of over 50 stained glass windows, each one illuminating a different aspect of the Biblical stories. Jesus draws near when we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures.

Fourth and finally, the two travelers opened their eyes to Jesus when he took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. He became known to them in the breaking of the bread. It was the simple action that Jesus commanded his followers to do in remembrance of him. This is my Body. This is my Blood. I think of all the Eucharists that we celebrate under this ceiling, whether it be at the high altar, or the chancel altar. Jesus himself draws near and is present when we break the bread and pass the cup. They are still at it today at St. Margaret’s Church in Hemingford Abbot, as we are today at Grace Church in New York, both thin places between heaven and earth.

Many of you know a book by the name of *The Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis. The story is about the battle for the soul of an ordinary man, told from the viewpoint of the demons who are working to possess him. Throughout his life they tempt him, try his patience, nurture his anger, and lead him along wrong pathways for their own sake. Along the way the demons are thwarted because the man joins the church and surrounds himself with other Christians. In so doing, the man unwittingly steps into a thin place where heaven and earth intermingle and overlap.

At the end of the story the man dies, and much to the chagrin of the demons, he awakens in heaven. Lewis describes with a memorable quote the moment the man lifts up his eyes and sees the Communion of Saints, the glorious company of angels, and even Jesus himself:

He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realized what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had

supposed himself alone. So that now he could say to them, one by one, not “Who *are* you?” but “So it was *you* all the time.” ... And he saw not only Them, he saw Him.

The man saw the Lord and recognized him. While the two travelers walked and talked on the road to Emmaus, Jesus came near and went with them. Likewise, as we gather together under this ceiling, welcome the stranger, study the Scriptures, and break the bread, we will catch fleeting glimpses of him who is the resurrection and the life. Now we see through a glass dimly. Then we shall see face to face.

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