

Scandalous forgiveness: Luke 24:13-35

Appearing to two nobodies going nowhere is an interesting choice.

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

I like the fertility symbolism surrounding Easter—bunnies scattering colorful eggs all over the place for children to find, the Teutonic goddess of spring, earth renewing itself, etc. If these ancient rites hadn't been co-opted by capitalism, hadn't morphed into pastel M&Ms, plastic grass and My Little Ponies with bunny ears, I might find it a relief to preach on the fecundity of spring, rather than trying to tell the story of a living, breathing dead man. Staring at the resurrection of Jesus head-on is difficult.

Perhaps the disciples on the road to Emmaus have similar issues. They presumably know the scripture; they know the pitch and cadence of Jesus' voice, maybe even the sounds he made in his sleep, the way he chewed his food—and yet once he's crucified, dead, buried and raised, they actually look him in the face and can't see him. Maybe that's because these two, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple, weren't his greatest disciples. Maybe they always sat at the edge of the meals, near the door where they could slip outside to smoke when the discussions got long-winded. Maybe they were the type to walk at a distance from the official group, making jokes, muffling their laughter. Perhaps if it had been Peter and another of the Twelve on the road, they would have known him. But Jesus appears to these two.

Appearing to two nobodies going nowhere is an interesting choice when you think of all the other possibilities for the debut of the risen Lord. It seems to indicate a different way of working, a different set of concerns than those of, say, Karl Rove. Why not appear in front of Caesar or the Sanhedrin? The scene is nothing like the spectacles created by presidential candidates with their bussed-in crowds and their camera crews. The stories the Gospel writers tell about the resurrection from the dead of the Savior of the world are undramatic, understated, maybe even recklessly minimalist compared to the dénouements of Greek heroes, Teutonic goddesses and Harry Potter.

Jesus comes quietly, unnoticed, more gently than one might expect an unjustly tortured murder victim who has just risen from the dead to come. He does call the two “fools” and says they are “slow-of-heart to believe,” yet he doesn’t use some undeniable glory to persuade or coerce, to knock them over or get them down on their knees. Instead he proceeds to open the scripture for them.

This could seem like an irresponsible way for him to be spending his time. This man was stripped naked, humiliated, mocked and tortured to death at the hands of a military regime in collusion with corrupt religious authorities. This might seem like an appropriate time for a resurrected revolutionary leader victim to bring the bastards to justice—something a little more along the lines of direct action.

But perhaps that is contrary to what it is he means to reveal. The risen victim takes the script(ure) that people have used to help negotiate the world, shakes it out and says look, it’s not what you thought. He makes them see what they’ve looked at a thousand times and never seen. It’s a little frustrating that he shows them, yet scripture doesn’t give us the content of his interpretation—solid words, a revised script. Maybe the content is really all right there in him: a god who doesn’t come seeking vengeance. That’s astonishing, given the principles that we tend to believe are necessary to order and structure the universe. Incredible.

The disciples wanted the machine taken down. Their faith had a lot to do with hope for a time when the good and the faithful would finally win the day. Jesus coming back as he does, acting as he does after he’s been murdered by the faithless and the faithful and betrayed by his friends, somehow makes it clear that the saving story can’t be about God and the good people versus the bad people. To tell the truth, there weren’t really any good people in the story of his crucifixion—no heroes, no innocents, no characters to whose exemplary behavior we might cling.

Jesus says to the two people on the road: can’t you see that this had to happen—that the mechanisms of division, the self-deceptive and ferocious need to make ourselves out as innocent, the fear of a violent god who demands blood—how all that had to be undone? What is the good news of great joy? God, the creative Lover of the world, is willing to die at the hands of his people and then comes back again, not to make them pay, but to give them more love. It’s unstoppable, transformative, scandalous forgiveness for all the betrayers, scapegoaters, murdering fools, consumer drones, Karl Rove, you and me.

Later the people on the road realize that their hearts are burning within them, and it changes everything. The disciples go on to preach the gospel of the grace of God—an unfettered forgiveness that cuts to the heart, an astonishing freedom to love one another earnestly, without judgment. The church's legacy is this embarrassingly unguarded, ridiculously fertile yes.