

Resurrection, recognition, and revelation

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My father died about three years ago. As May comes around, the azaleas spring to life, and I remember my father's passing. Just as sure as the tulips and dogwood blossom, my mind wanders back to my dad. Even when I begin to open up to these strange and wonderful stories of Easter, struggling with the notions of recognition and revelation, I think about the last few months of my father's life.

Dad had numerous neurological and heart problems. I was in Virginia and my parents were in Florida. It was hard to be away, so my mom would alert me to the news through texts. During the downward spiral, mom texted every day, with updates. Things like:

"Your dad slept all day today."

"Your dad woke up to eat."

"Your dad is still laughing at my jokes."

"Your dad is very confused. He has forgotten how to eat. But he has not forgotten his grandchildren."

And then, she wrote, "Your dad didn't recognize me."

I put the phone down when I read that one. I breathed deeply. We had spoken, as a family, about whether dad should keep taking the medicine that kept the dementia away. We wondered if the fact that the circuits in his brain weren't working the way that they ought to be was a gift to him. He spent his last days "working out his salvation"—as the Scriptures say—and it included a lot of painful weeping. Like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills. My sister and I wondered if he would be more at peace if he didn't take the pills.

Mom disagreed. She wanted to keep him on the medication that was able to keep the dementia at bay. And this is why: She never wanted to walk into his room and scare him. She never wanted to be a stranger to him.

You know when you have been in a relationship with a loved one for a long time, you can almost communicate with your eyes. You know within a few moments what kind of mood that person is in, before he or she ever says a word. You know when you're talking too much at a dinner party and you encounter that sharp look. You know when you have been traveling, and you are finally home, when you see the warm welcoming creases.

My mom wanted to be able to walk into that bedroom, and see that reaction. She wanted his eyes to recognize her. She longed to catch a glimpse of those eyes that could blaze with anger, plead with longing, or smile with love at the sight of her. She just couldn't give that up. And by the end of our conversation, I couldn't blame her. Dad kept taking the medicine so that he would recognize her.

But one day, no amount of medicine could help. She entered his bedroom, where hospice had set up that hospital bed, and his eyes had no spark at all. They were flat. When she began to talk, his pupils wandered silently toward her. He sat, blankly, silently looking at her, almost looking beyond her.

My mom walked up to him, ran her fingers through his hair and said, "You don't recognize me, do you?"

He shook his bewildered head.

And my mom (this will tell you something about my parents' marriage) replied, "Well, you better start recognizing me, Mister. Because I have been your wife for the last 50 years! You're not getting out of this that easily. You have no excuse for not knowing who I am." She started laughing and he joined in. He was still confused, but he was eager to take part in the joke.

They had three children, four grandchildren, and shared fifty years of marriage, yet she was a stranger standing before him.

For the past three years, the stories of Easter have become enmeshed with that story—the story of my father's death. The two have taught me many things. I notice the Easter scenes seem muddled and complicated. I cannot help but understand

how disorienting grief can be. Mary sees Jesus in the garden and she thinks that he is the gardener. She doesn't recognize him.

Close friends cannot believe the stories that they are whispering to each other as they hide in locked rooms.

They cannot quite trust the women, who saw the empty tomb, and they demand proof.

On the Road to Emmaus, followers of Jesus walk right beside him, until the sun sets in the horizon. They feel the warming in their hearts, and yet they still do not recognize him. They think he's a stranger.

How did they not know was him? Was there something different about his body? He is, after all, appearing in such strange places. He shows up outside of his own grave, in locked rooms, on the beach, on the road, on the hillside. Sometimes he vanishes.

Then there's that moment of recognition. That moment that looks so different in each case.

For Mary? It was hearing her name on Jesus' lips. When she heard it, she recognized him.

For Thomas? The man who demanded that he would some tactile proof? Jesus showed off his scars to him, he invited Thomas to touch the gaping wounds. But there's no mention of Thomas actually touching the torn flesh. It seems that seeing was enough for him.

For some of the disciples the recognition came when the stranger on the beach told them to put the net on the side the boat, and when they did, their nets were overflowing with fish.

And for the disciples on the way to Emmaus, they recognize him when he broke the bread.

And in all of these stories, there is such confusion, disorientation and bewilderment. I wonder, why did they keep that bit in the story? Why didn't the authors edit it out? If I were Mary, I probably would have told people, "Well, I knew who it was all along..."

I never understood this, until I went through the disorienting grief. Now it seems that these Easter moments were somehow more than *recognition*. It was not that they merely identified the color of skin, cut of his hair, or shape of his eyes.

It was *revelation*. In each case, they were confronted with the realization that the stranger standing in front of them was somehow divine. In the sorrow, confusion, doubt, grief, Jesus was revealed.

These events tell us something important about the nature of revelation. Revelation means a revealing. And since revelation is ongoing, then there is always something of God that remains hidden. We never know God fully; we are always waking up to new mysteries of God.

All of this meant something else to me, in my own disorienting grief. Because it reminded me, that just like the disciples, when we are in the depth of our sorrows, we may not even recognize that Jesus is standing right beside us, whispering in our ear, warming our hearts, trying to make sense of the confusion that surrounds us. We may not see God at all in those moments. Because *the very fact that God is sometimes revealed in our lives hinges on the reality that God is often hidden. Unless God is hidden, God cannot be revealed.*

Yet, in our confusing grief, in our sorrows, loss, anxieties, depressions, addiction, recoveries, worries, and concerns, in each place that we find ourselves, we know that if we keep walking, if we keep gathering at the table, if we keep listening for God, if we keep putting one foot in front of the other, if we keep treating the strangers among us as messengers from God, if we stay open to those moments when we feel strangely warmed, then God just might reveal godself to us.