

April 19, Easter 3 (Luke 24:13–35)

I don't know where Jesus is heading when he encounters the two companions on the road, but it seems like maybe he never does get there.

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One time a man at church told me his daughter in Chicago was living intentionally. Years later, I still think about that intentional woman, and I like to imagine her life, how she plans out every day and then executes that plan. She only does things she intends to do, never anything she does not intend to do. When she goes to the market she does not forget the chives and cheddar on her list. She never wastes time, never gets lost, never misplaces her daughter's Christmas present, never bungles her son's haircut.

For me, being born was unintentional, and I have never really gotten back on track. Last May I messed up my son's haircut, and on the way to Great Clips we drove past a lady holding up a sign that said "PUPPIES," so we stopped just to look, and we adopted a French bulldog, a neutron star of a dog: of small radius and high density. As soon as we got him home, he fell off the deck, broke his leg, and had to have a \$4,700 surgery. The road to Great Clips, like the road to Emmaus, is full of curve balls.

Cleopas and his companion expected Jesus to redeem Israel, but he died. Then they expected him to be in his tomb, but others found him gone—they heard there were angels at the tomb. The "stranger" who comes to them turns out to be Jesus, and then the minute they recognize him, he vanishes. Whammy, whiplash!

I've always heard this story called "the road to Emmaus," but since most of it takes place before the two companions ever get to Emmaus, it could just as well be called "the road." When they get back to Jerusalem they tell the disciples "what happened on the road." I don't know where Jesus is heading when he encounters them on the road, but it seems like maybe he never does get there, rerouted by conversation and bread-breaking. On a recent morning the weather was soft, sunshiny. Then a violent windstorm blew our trampoline into the aspen tree and knocked out our power, then it snowed, and by the end of the day the weather was gray and slushy. I do genuinely admire that intentional woman, with her unswerving plans and accomplishments, but for me life often feels like Montana weather—uncontrollable—and instead of feeling like I am on the road to Spokane or the road to success, I feel I am just on the road, with all kinds of things happening untouchable by intention.

The stranger/Jesus calls the two men "slow of heart" because they have not believed the prophets, but he doesn't therefore ditch them for quicker-hearted fellows. Quick of heart is great; slow of heart is all right too—the important thing is not to be dead of heart. Jesus talks through the scriptures, beginning with Moses (who in Exodus 4:10 calls himself "slow of speech and slow of tongue"), and in the end the men say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us?" Their hearts are slow but flammable.

There is within us a magic organ that burns or not in response to things. It can't be forced, won't be hoodwinked, won't ignite in response to strong-arming, to manipulative authority that leads to seeming compliance but hearts left cold. On Mount Carmel there are 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah who cannot light a fire despite all their histrionics around the sacrificed bull, and that poor chopped-up bull can't act like it's on fire anymore than can the heart. But equally, when the heart is on fire, it can't act like it's not. The heart is not an

actor! Maybe the reason the two men's eyes are "kept from recognizing him" is so they can learn to recognize with their hearts.

I know what it's like to have a slow and flammable heart, and I know what it's like to never reach my destination. I have seen an unusual number of curve balls in the last two years; some of them knocked me out and some I've been able to whack into the outfield. For all my fantasies of intentionality, in retrospect I can (often) appreciate how life is uncooperative, unprogrammable, like a bear—not least for entertainment's sake. If I could orchestrate it, then I could anticipate it, and real life would feel like watching a rerun.

Anyway, there are some really interesting strangers out there. Also, a Frenchie is more exciting than a haircut. He dances with cats! He hops like a bunny! So on your walk today, don't forget to take your heart. Who knows, you might meet someone who makes it burn, and the interruptions to the story will become the story.

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