

A HOLY DISAPPEARING ACT

It was a small, disorganized band of frightened disciples that gathered after the crucifixion of Jesus: Peter, James, John and the rest of "The Eleven" were there, along with the women who'd accompanied Jesus from Galilee: Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James; and a number of un-named others.

They huddled together in some remote upper room in Jerusalem. Was it over a shop—maybe in someone's attic? Was it the same upper room where Jesus broke bread with his disciples on the night he was betrayed? I picture a secret place, someone down on the street keeping watch, trying to look nonchalant as a trio of Roman soldiers walk by—off duty and oblivious to everything except the wine, women, and song they anticipate at some inn.

The disciples come to that secret place in twos or threes, looking over their shoulders—the hoods of their robes pulled over their heads and clutched tightly to their throats as if protecting themselves from a driving rain.

Inside, every sound of footsteps on the stairs gets a response: "Shhh!" "Turn down the lamp!" "Who's there?" A secret knock, a door opened just a crack... "It's Cleopas and his friend. Hurry; come in before somebody sees you! Why have you come out after dark? and so far from home?"

The two new arrivals breathlessly tell their story. It's recorded in the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel. Cleopas and his friend had been going home to Emmaus, a half-hour walk east of Jerusalem—through the Golden Gate, down into the Kidron Valley, past the Garden of Gethsemane and up the Mount of Olives. As they topped the hill they were joined by another man, and they began to talk about the events of the weekend: the crucifixion on Friday, the commotion caused Sunday by reports that Jesus had been seen alive.

"We were confused and frightened," they said. "but he began with Moses and all the prophets, he opened our minds to understand the Scriptures concerning Messiah.

"When we got home it was getting dark, so we invited him to stay with us for the night. When we sat down to supper, the most wonderful thing happened: he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to us, and we recognized him as the Lord. And he was gone."

It's interesting to note that the two men from Emmaus were not among the disciples who sat at the table with Jesus on the night he was betrayed. And yet, he was made known to them in the breaking of bread.

And they finished their story: "Our hearts were strangely and wonderfully warmed as he spoke."

Mary burst out, "See! I told you! He's alive! I saw him!"

Matthew snorted, "What kind of story is that? First a dead man supposedly walked away from his own grave, and now he vanishes into thin air before these two men's eyes! Has the whole world gone mad?"

"Then how do you explain the empty tomb?" Peter broke in. "I saw it with my own eyes." And back and forth they go, confused, frightened. "You were dreaming!" "You were hallucinating!" "Somebody stole the body!" "But who?" "And why?"

Over the next days the disciples continued to come together daily, and the conversation was usually pretty much the same:

"Did you see him today? What did he do? What did he say?"

"Jonas saw him on the road and talked to him."

"No, I didn't see him; but word on the street is that a large group of people (some say as many as 500), claim he appeared to them."

So much is asked of the Disciples' faith.

And the frightened believers continued to meet daily, to pray, to break bread, to hear the apostles' teaching; and they told their story. Some who heard it believed; most didn't. But the remainder of the book of Acts is the story of these frightened, disorganized believers, taking their story to the far corners of the known world, establishing churches all over the Middle East, Asia Minor, Italy.

Out of this struggling beginning—this fellowship of believers hiding behind locked doors—emerged a movement so strong that only twenty years later, in Thessalonica, opponents brought charges, saying, "These men have turned the world upside down!" And all that centers on the unbelievable story of resurrection.

What's going on? Some say the story is "religious myth"—or even worse, a fabricated story—a "Pep Talk" from Die-Hard radicals to keep a dying movement alive.

Others suggest the resurrection story is not about a physical body. It's symbolic; a liturgical celebration in which Jesus is raised "spiritually" in our hearts.

Still others say resurrection was a physical fact.

Whichever way you go, there's no hard evidence—no way to verify or prove your position. Whatever position you take, it's a matter of faith.

What if the New Testament stories of resurrection are not nearly so much about what happened to Jesus as they are about what happened to the disciples? Read the Gospels and note how many times in post-resurrection appearances Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

Every great time of renewal and religious empowerment—in the history of Israel and in the history of Christianity—has emerged from a discovery or a re-discovery of the word. The Word. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is*

the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons.”

This fearful, waiting community, anxious and bewildered, had no power—could generate no power of its own. And yet, something powerful happened that caused this fragile community to have energy, courage, imagination, and resources completely out of proportion to its size. They changed the direction of history!

We've seen it happen: something insignificant as a high school football game. A team that's obviously outmanned on the field demonstrates tremendous courage and determination and turns in a heroic performance—maybe even pulls out the upset! And a community comes together in ways it never has before.

A rag-tag, disorganized, ill-equipped, untrained bunch of colonists, spread across the eastern front of a continent, holds off the armies and navies of the most powerful military empire in world history; and wins independence for itself.

A community, virtually destroyed by natural disaster, pulls together, and rebuilds, stronger than ever.

It's the heroic stuff of which legends have been made since the beginning of human history. Life is renewed: better, stronger.

But those events are no more than miniature replicas of what is reported in these few verses of Luke. What Luke describes is no mere display of temporary, local heroism. It effected the direction of world history.

And remember: it all began from something that happened to the disciples. They didn't initiate it. They were hiding behind locked doors!

Remember also that what triggered the whole thing was an

event called resurrection—an event described, unbelievably, as a man being raised from the dead.

Believe it, or don't believe it; but one thing seems abundantly clear: something happened to the disciples! Something happened so incredible—so unbelievable—that human language and vocabulary proves inadequate to comprehend it; so powerful, that a handful of frightened, unorganized people changed the direction of world history!

Maybe we try too hard to explain and verify everything. Given our "scientific" orientation toward empirical evidence, maybe we've become locked into a way of thinking that says, "If I can't verify and understand and explain it, it isn't real."

Don't misunderstand. In spite of some religious and political pockets of denial, the desire and effort to understand and explain is natural and valid. It is one demonstration of faithful stewardship of God's gift of the human brain and its capacity to reason. It sent Neal Armstrong to walk on the moon; it has almost rid the planet of polio and smallpox; and I have no doubt it soon will deliver us from COVID-19.

But if we can understand and explain something—given the limitations inherent in the clay of which we are made—maybe it isn't powerful enough to enable us to perform beyond those limitations. When the mystery is gone, the power may also depart, not because the reality disappears, but because of what happens to *us* when we lose interest.

Can we celebrate the mystery? Something unexplainable happened to two disciples on the road to Emmaus late in the afternoon of the first Easter. And they ran back to Jerusalem and shared their incredible story with the disciples; and the disciples continued to meet daily for prayer, breaking of bread, and the teachings of the apostles. And if you have difficulty believing what we've just talked about, you'll never believe what happened fifty days later!