

A Hot Mess
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Luke 24:1-12

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Amazed at what had happened. Peter went home. Home. It means different things for all of us. For some of us it is right here. Where we were born. The community we grew up in. The neighborhood and neighbors we have known all our lives. For others it is the 'home' where we grew up where we know longer live, the smells of our favorite meals and the comfort of our childhood bedroom. For the Israelites who were exiles in Babylon and far from home, it felt like torment to sing songs of home as the Babylonians taunted them for cheap entertainment (Psalm 137:3).

During the aftermath of hurricane Ida, I had the opportunity to visit the home I grew up in as our engaged in a variety of activities until it was safe to return to our 'new' home. My childhood home was well kept and seemed to be well lived in, but everything seemed smaller and while there may or may not have been one or two people nearby who might have remembered me, it was not home because my mom and dad and sisters no longer lived there and I was not surrounded by a community that felt like home. I was a stranger standing in front of what used to be home. Home is a moving target. I can remember a former church member whose maiden name was McLeod talking about her first trip to Scotland a land that her ancestors had left centuries before. She remembered crossing over the border into the green and cloudy land and getting goosebumps on her arm and chills down her spine, and being overcome by an emotion that she was finally home. That felt like home even though she had never lived there.

I believe there are somewhere between 50 and 100 retired Presbyterian ministers who are part of the Black Mountain Presbyterian Church just outside the gates of Montreat, North Carolina. Can you imagine the Monday morning quarterbacking in that congregation? I used to be puzzled why so many ministers would want to live together, but perhaps in an itinerant vocation, Montreat became home, the place where they first contemplated the call to ministry, a thin place where they could sense the presence of God, a place of refuge in the storms of life and from the demands of ministry. One of our most beautiful hymns, a translation of Psalm 23, 'My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,' ends this way: 'the sure provisions of my God attend me all my days; O may your house be my abode, and all my work be praise. There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.'

There is a sense that being in the presence of God is like being at home whether we mean comfort food or the window seat in our house where we could collapse in a book or find safety and refuge from the challenges of bills, the complications of life, the riddles

of pandemic, the politics of war. Home can be sanctuary, comfort, and safety. It can be escape from troubles and life's perplexities. Home can be our north star, the place where we get our bearings, the place we go to figure things out. I am not sure which if these descriptions were home for Peter, Jesus' top notch disciple, but in the face of the resurrection, in the presence of the Easter miracle, in his astonishment at the empty tomb, Luke tells us that while he was amazed at all that had happened, Peter went home. There is something that just hits me wrong about that. There is no moment of glee or celebration or a moment of comprehension or a movement within him to go and tell others, much less is there a trumpet blast. Rather in the face of this great miracle, Peter strikes a discordant note. He went home. I don't know if he shrugged his shoulders and left uncertain about what to do next. I don't know if he went home in fear and trembling trying to collect his thoughts and regroup. I don't know if he went home for Easter brunch and a return to life as normal. All Luke tells us is that Peter went home.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the event of Easter though, is more like a "hot mess" than it is like comfortably going home. In fact, it is so unnerving, I wonder if Peter heads home to find comfort and safety out of the way from whatever Easter means. Knowing the rest of Peter's biography, we can all confirm that once he got home, Christ's resurrection never let him stay there but propelled him into a way of life and ministry that took him far from home and redefined whatever he understood home to be. Christ's resurrection from the dead made him long for a home that is more than nostalgia for comfort and safety; it refused to let him settle for a neat and tidy and orderly withdraw. And perhaps that is what it continues to do with us...undoing us and all that we thought we had ordered in our lives so carefully, and then puts us back together again in a way that better reflects the likeness of the crucified and risen Lord.

Paul Hooker who teaches at Austin Seminary laments our tendency during holy week and Easter to adopt what he calls an 'athletic theology' that moves briskly past the rough edges of Good Friday and Christ's death on Saturday, and immediately rushes to pomp and circumstance and trumpet blasts and bombastic preaching on Easter Sunday. He warns we sanitize death as nothing more than a 'nap from which we awaken to a new and better life.' Yet he reminds us, especially as we watch night after night the horrors of death and destruction live in the Ukraine, that there is 'no Easter, in any year, but especially in this one—unless there is death. There is no new beginning, no new creation, no new life in Christ until and unless there is a death, an end, a point beyond which there is no possibility of which we can conceive.' Maybe that is why Peter heads home. Even as he stared into the empty tomb in amazement, he could not conceive or imagine the future God intended for him, or maybe he could and it was too overwhelming and unexpected for him to contemplate, so he opted for the comfort of home. Easter begins not with a self-assured trumpet blast, but with a quiet puzzled walk home, a collection of disciples and followers who are not perplexed and uncertain what to do or where to go

next as the ground beneath them seems to shift and shake. Easter begins not with bombast, but with people who are terrified and who prefer to keep their head down and find security in the safety, not certain at all how to grasp that God is doing a new thing in their midst.

That is why Easter is such a ‘hot mess,’ not only for them, but also for us. The technical definition of a “hot mess” is: “a person or thing that is spectacularly disordered, especially one that is a source of peculiar fascination.” It is somewhat ironic that Easter Sunday has become an all dressed up, victorious, triumphant affair, because the story here in Luke is anything but neat, tidy, dressed up, and immaculately tied together with a bow. It throws life as we knew it into disarray. It undoes the women at the tomb and transforms them from mourners and morticians into the first preachers and proclaimers of the gospel in all their terror and uncertainty about what is happening right in front of them. It takes Peter, who thought he had put this whole unfortunate situation behind him, it follows him back home, but does not leave him there very long. Easter undoes Peter, but Easter also helps put him back together again, sending his life on a trajectory he had not imagined for himself. After declaring at least three times he did not know this person, that he wanted nothing to do with this person, Peter goes home only to find that the risen Christ will show up there too, never letting him off the hook or letting him return easily to an undemanding life back at home.

And maybe that is what kind of resurrection God continues to pull with us, too, not letting us return so easily to the undemanding life, not letting us believe we can domesticate his disruptive grace with a nice colorful Easter bow, not letting us reduce Easter’s undoing of death and the natural order of things to caterpillars and butterflies and the rite of spring. Theologian Alan Lewis reminds us starkly where Easter begins: ‘a skull-shaped site of harrowing, diabolic execution and the cold, sepulchral resting place of a victim’s cruelly punctured cadaver.’¹ This is no natural cycle of seasons, no transformation of larva to butterfly, this is the hot mess of Easter that is anything but neat and tidy, this is the hot mess of Easter that won’t let us head back home and to our lives as if it never happened, this is the hot mess of Easter that endures infinitely longer than the most mighty trumpet blast. If the power of the risen Christ were some kind of energy drink or a quick bolt of lightning or a one-off spectacle that gives us an adrenaline rush, then I think Peter would have ridden the wave and gotten excited rather than turn back for home. In an article in *Journal for Preachers*, Dave Davis reminds us of something that Peter must have known all too well...that Easter doesn’t come ‘as an all dressed up, victorious, triumphant fanfare.’ Rather, it shows up in the ‘vigil of companionship with a friend of forty-five years now a widow,’ or in the persistence to walk into the hot mess

¹ Alan Lewis, *Between Cross & Resurrection*, 197.

of a friend 'whose marriage crumbled away, who cannot fathom what the future will hold' or to offer or receive the kind of forgiveness that surprises the world and defies human understanding.' Easter comes not so much with an adrenaline rush or a monster drink but with the steadfast courage of the people of God when there are lots of more comfortable, neat and tidy, and less demanding ways to live our lives. Our problem is that God does God's best work with a hot mess not with the immaculate and the comfortable. That is true for Peter, and thanks be to God that is true for us.

So even after hearing this Easter proclamation, whether you are perplexed about all that occurred or you are uncertain about what happened or maybe you think you have just heard an idle tale. Perhaps are amazed at what happened but you go home anyway.... may the risen Christ never let you stay there, but continue to make a hot mess of your comfortable and well-ordered life, not only today, but until his kingdom comes. Amen.