

## *Contents*

### **Easter 3**

*Then their eyes were  
opened, and they  
recognized him; and he  
vanished from their sight.*

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#### **• Lectionary Readings (Year A)**

##### ***Revised Common Lectionary***

First Reading	Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Second Reading	1 Peter 1:17-23
Gospel	<b>Luke 24:13-35</b>
Psalm	116:1-4, 12-19

**Luke 24:13-35**

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, 5 answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now 10 the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe 15 all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and 25 their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## *Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs*

1. When Jesus approaches the two on their way to Emmaus, their eyes are kept from recognizing him. What does the story say between the lines about why they do not recognize Jesus? What is it about their eyes? What do you suppose they can see? Not see?

When Jesus questions them about what they are discussing while they walk along we are told: *They stood still, looking sad.* What do you suppose has produced the stillness? Their eyes do not see Jesus, and they look sad. How would you describe the source, and even the implications, of their sadness?

... after Jesus *beginning with Moses and all the prophets, ... has interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures,* though their hearts may have burned as he spoke, the two do not recognize Jesus. It seems they ask the stranger to stay the night with them because the day is now nearly over rather than because they know who he is. What do you suspect continues to blind the two? With all the right answers from Jesus, why do they yet not get it?

When is it their eyes are opened? What has sparked or caused their recognition? How do you suppose at table the taking, blessing, breaking, and giving enables them to see? And what do you make of him vanishing as soon as they see and he is known?

## At the Workbench: Easter 3

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2. What have you known of losing the one person in your life who held your world together? When have you experienced the end of hope with the death or departure of such a person, the destruction or collapse of an institution or community? What have you known of a kind of grief that blinds and a despair that brings life to a sad stillness? When have you experienced this mindless and sightless walking along the road in your nation, church, business, profession, school, or team? How have you lived such a story in your marriage or in another kind of relationship that was once at your heart, core, or center?

What was it that kept you from recognizing that the one for whom you grieved was not dead but alive? What kept you from seeing that all you knew to be lost could still possibly be found? How did you manage to not see what stood before you and spoke to you as hope?

What was a table around which you gathered where you discovered not just bread and wine but new life? What had to be taken, blessed, and broken before you could recognize and receive any new possibility?

3. Consider in your life today a hope that has been shattered because a person, dream, or certainty has died? What do you know of a kind of grief and sadness over the loss of someone or something at your center that continues to blind you?

Name the person, conviction, or dream that stops you and fills you with sadness today:

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## Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 24:13-35 • May 8, 2011

How might you take it in your hands?

Bless it?

Break it—or simply allow it to be or let it be broken?

Receive its brokenness back as a sign of resurrection,  
possibility, and new life?

4. John Dominic Crossan says, “Emmaus never happened. Emmaus is always happening.” What from your life experience leads you to agree or disagree with Crossan?

What is the road to Emmaus you are walking? What is the grief? Who is the stranger? What is your blindness doing for and to you? How might the taking, blessing, and breaking be an occasion for you to discover Easter in your life?

## Reading Between the Lines

*Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.*

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Just what was so important in Emmaus that these two men could not, would not wait just a little while longer in Jerusalem to find out what really had happened? Were they so dismissive of the women that it wasn't worth checking out? Was the double-checking by some of those who *were with us* insufficient to pique their curiosity? What do you imagine was strong enough to draw them out of Jerusalem at such a time? What is there that pulls you away from hints of resurrection, away from stories too good to be true? How do you find yourself traveling familiar roads to ease the pain, forget the trauma, put the world back together again? What do you meet there that makes everything different?

*Andy Kille*

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"Just because it didn't happen, doesn't mean it isn't true."  
—Bill Dols, paraphrasing Tim O'Brien

"Emmaus never happened. Emmaus is always happening."  
—John Dominic Crossan.

What road are you walking right now? Draw it.

To what Emmaus are you returning? Who are your companions on the way? List them.

What grief do you carry with you? What longing? What unfulfilled dream? Name it.

What table do you share? What roof shelters you? What stranger blesses you?

What new possibility beckons? What could you do today to turn from Emmaus to that new path?

What opens up?

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## Parallel Readings

### From *The Center for Progressive Christianity*

#### *Truer Than Fact*

Because of the weight which Protestants place on the authority of scripture, we in particular are in grave need of another way of responding to critical biblical scholarship. Neither epistemological schizophrenia nor fundamentalism are acceptable adaptations to the critical challenge, because they maintain a hold on “old time religion” at the cost of ignorance and rigidity. So, what would an acceptable response look like? In what sense could we still affirm that the stories of our sacred scriptures are true if we give up the assumption that they are literally true?

To answer that question, let me share with you some insights from a collection of stories about Vietnam, written by combat veteran, Tim O'Brien, entitled *The Things They Carried*. The book starts off like a documentary. O'Brien describes the various things infantrymen carried with them into battle: weapons, ammo, flack jackets, c-rations, wire, detonators, ear plugs (for blowing tunnels), flash lights, ponchos, mosquito repellent, iodine tablets, malaria tablets, cigarettes, matches. The list of items goes on and on, and moves toward the personal: photographs of family and girl friends, penny flutes and harmonicas, good luck charms, New Testaments, a girl friend's panty hose, worn round the head. O'Brien does his best to tell you what it was like to be with those men, what their world was like. He moves from the tangible things they carried to the intangible: fear, rage, revenge, bewilderment, hope. Then, he gives up talking about the things they carried and tells war stories; and because he started with the documentary style, you assume the stories he's been telling all along are true, that is, factually true. But you're wrong, because he lets you know that he's been making some of it up. But, that doesn't matter, says O'Brien because:

“. . . a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth [he means factual truth].

Take the kind of war story that we read about on that monument across the street. Almost all the Black Vietnam

Thomas C. David, III,  
“Truer Than Fact: A Sermon  
on the Nature of Biblical  
Truth,” *The Center for Pro-  
gressive Christianity*, [http://  
www.tpc.org/library/article.  
cfm?library\\_id=131](http://www.tpc.org/library/article.cfm?library_id=131)

vets honored there lost their lives by throwing themselves on grenades to save their buddies close by. O'Brien tells another version of this typical story: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it's a killer grenade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, "Why d'ya do that for?" and the jumper says, "Story of my life, man," and the other guy starts to smile but he's dead. That's a true story that never happened.

What an odd thing to say: "a true story that never happened." What does O'Brien mean? He means that he made the story up, obviously. It's the kind of thing that might have happened, somewhere, but as far as he knows, it didn't. Nevertheless, it's a truer version of the man-jumps-on-grenade story than those actual occurrences where the jumper did in fact save his buddies. Why? Because the story where they all die tells you more truly what Vietnam was like, even though it's a made up story. It tells you more truly because that whole war was about useless sacrifice, and the day to day killing and dying didn't make any sense at all.

So, when an author is trying to place you by imagination in a time and place, and help you to understand what it was really like to be there, he or she may choose to make whole stories up, or at least parts of stories, and those fictional narrations may tell you more truly what it was like to be in that situation than a factual story, where every event is documented. In that sense, made-up stories can justifiably be called true, provided that the author makes every effort to convey through his fiction what it was really like to be there, instead of inventing stuff out of thin air. (There's quite a difference between historical fiction and fantasy.)

Now why did I bring O'Brien's comment about made-up stories sometimes being truer than factual ones into a sermon about biblical authority? Because its high time we acknowledge that the truth of the stories recounted in our sacred scriptures is much more like the truth of historical fiction than the truth of documentaries. Randall Helms, in his book entitled *Gospel Fictions*, says that many of the New Testament stories about Jesus and his disciples are deliberately made up, not from thin air mind you, but from bits and pieces of memory, just, as I might add, O'Brien's war stories are fictional constructions based upon his real life experience. Just as in O'Brien's case, so also in the case of the biblical writers, the authors' intent for these made up stories is certainly not to deceive, nor even to entertain, but rather to enlighten the reader as to what it was like to be there, to know Vietnam, or to know Jesus, in a far, far more effective way than mere documentaries could achieve. Therefore, abandoning the assumption that our scriptures are literally true does not imply that we should regard them with any less respect. Quite to the contrary, though they be fictions, biblical stories may indeed

*Because its high time we acknowledge that the truth of the stories recounted in our sacred scriptures is much more like the truth of historical fiction than the truth of documentaries.*

bear even greater authority for us, according to our ability to use them, through our imaginations, to place ourselves in the same situations of faith as the characters in the stories. John Dominic Crossan says, about the story of the disciples walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, that this story never happened, yet it is always happening. What does he mean by that? That the story is made up, but that nevertheless it is a very true-to-life story, because it enables the reader, by his imagination, to place himself in the disciples' shoes, so that he can travel with Jesus too, and know him for himself. So that today, he can recognize Jesus on his own road.

To acknowledge that there is a lot of fiction in the Bible may destroy some people's faith altogether, but it need not. To preserve our faith after such an acknowledgment requires that we acknowledge our own responsibility, through imagination, for making the text live, so that it can become truer than fact.

Thomas C. Davis, III

### **From *Some Girls Bite***

Have you ever had a moment where you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you were in the right place? That you were on the right journey? Maybe the sense that you'd crossed a boundary, jumped a hurdle, and somehow, after facing some unconquerable mountain, found yourself suddenly on the other side of it? When the night was warm, and the wind was cool, and a song carried through the quiet streets around you. When you felt the entire world around you, and you were part of it—of the hum of it—and everything was good.

Contentment, I suppose, is the simple explanation for it. But it seems more than that, thicker than that, some unity of purpose, some sense of being truly, honestly, for that moment, at home.

Those moments never seem to last long enough. The song ends, the breeze stills, the worries and fears creep in again and you're left trying to move forward, but glancing back at the mountain behind you, wondering how you managed to cross it, afraid you really didn't—that the bulk and shadow over your shoulder might evaporate and re-form before you, and you'd be faced with the burden of crossing it again.

The song ends, and you stare at the quiet, dark house in front of you, and you grasp the doorknob, and walk back into your life.

Chloe Neill

Chloe Neill, <i>Some Girls Bite</i> , (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), pp. 198-99.
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### From *Bonhoeffer*

A few years later, in 1936, Bonhoeffer wrote his brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, who was as liberal theologically as Bonhoeffer was conservative. It says much about their relationship that he could write such things:

First of all I will confess quite simply—I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we need only to ask repeatedly and a little humbly, in order to receive this answer. One cannot simply *read* the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself. Only if we expect from it the ultimate answer, shall we receive it. That is because in the Bible God speaks to us. And one cannot simply think about God in one's own strength, one has to enquire of him. Only if we seek him, will he answer us. Of course it is also possible to read the Bible like any other book, that is to say from the point of view of textual criticism, etc., there is nothing to be said against that. Only that that is not the method which will reveal to us the heart of the Bible, but only the surface, just as we do not grasp the words of someone we love by taking them to bits, but by simply receiving them, so that for days they go on lingering in our minds, simply because they are the words of a person we love and just as these words reveal more and more of the person who said them as we go on, like Mary, "pondering them in our heart," so it will be with the words of the Bible. Only if we will venture to enter into the words of the Bible, as though in them this God were speaking to us who loves us and does not will to leave us alone with our questions, only so shall we learn to rejoice in the Bible. . . .

If it is I who determine where God is to be found, then I shall always find a God who corresponds to me in some way, who is obliging, who is connected with my own nature. But if God determines where he is to be found, then it will be in a place which is not immediately pleasing to my nature and which is not at all congenial to me. This place is the Cross of Christ. And whoever would find him must go to the foot of the Cross, as the Sermon on the Mount commands. This is not according to our nature at all; it is entirely contrary to it. But this is the message of the Bible, not only in the New but also in the Old Testament. . . .

And I would like to tell you now quite personally: since I have learnt to read the Bible in this way—and this has not been for so very long—it becomes every day more wonderful to me. I read it in the morning and the evening, often during the day as well, and every

Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2010), pp. 136-137.

day I consider a text which I have chosen for the whole week, and try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying. I know that without this I could not live properly any longer.

Eric Metaxas

**From *Listening to Your Life***

Jesus is apt to come into the very midst of life at its most real and inescapable. Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some kind of religious daydream, but. . . at supper time, or walking along a road. This is the element that all the stories about Christ's return to life have in common: Mary waiting at the empty tomb and suddenly turning around to see somebody standing there—someone she thought at first was the gardener; all the disciples except Thomas hiding out in a locked house, and then his coming and standing in the midst; and later, when Thomas was there, his coming again and standing in the midst; Peter taking his boat back after a night at sea, and there on the shore, near a little fire of coals, a familiar figure asking, "Children, have you any fish?"; the two men at Emmaus who knew him in the breaking of the bread. He never approached from on high, but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks.

Frederick Buechner

Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner*, compiled by George Connor, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 78.

## *Critical Background*

### **From *The Last Week***

The archetypal pattern produced by Good Friday and Easter is both personal and political. As the climax of Holy Week and the story of Jesus, Good Friday and Easter address the fundamental human question, What ails us? Most of us feel the force of this question—something is not right. So what ails us? Very compactly, egoism and injustice. And the two go together. We need personal transformation and political transformation.

*Egoism* is not a biblical word, but it names a central theme of Christian thought about the human condition, shaped by a reading of the Bible and reflection about human experience. Egoism means being centered in the self and its anxieties and preoccupations, what is sometimes called the “small self.” Egoism is centering in the anxious and fearful self and its concerns and desires. Alternatively, it is centering in the accomplished self, the successful self, and its achievements. Importantly, the problem is not that being a self is bad, as if the solution is ceasing to be a self. Rather, the issue is the kind of self that I am, that you are, that we are.

Good Friday and Easter, death and resurrection together, are a central image in the New Testament for the path to a transformed self. The path involves dying to an old way of being and being reborn into a new way of being. Good Friday and Easter are about this path, the path of dying and rising, of being born again.

All of the major witnesses of the New Testament testify to this. It is the “way” that Mark speaks about with his correlation of following Jesus and the path of death and resurrection. After Jesus speaks for the first time about his impending death and resurrection, he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34), thus pointing to participation in his path. Matthew and Luke take this over from Mark, and Luke adds the word “daily” (9:23) to make sure we get the point.

It is the path of transformation that Paul had experienced, when he wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:19-20). He affirms this path for all Christians when he writes about baptism as ritual enactment of dying and rising, death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-11). The result is a new self, a new creation: “If anyone in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Excerpt from 210-12 from  
*The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Copyright © 2006 by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

And it is the “way” at the center of John’s gospel. The Jesus of John’s gospel speaks explicitly about being “born again” (3:1-10). In another passage, he says that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it cannot bear fruit (12:24). He speaks of this way as “the only way” (14:6) in a verse that has unfortunately often become a triumphalist claim justifying Christian exclusivism. But within John’s incarnational theology, the death and resurrection of Jesus incarnates the way of transformation. This is what it means to say, “Jesus is the only way.” The path we see in him—dying and rising—is the path of personal transformation.

So there is powerful personal meaning to Lent, Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter. We are invited into the journey that leads through death to resurrection and rebirth. But when only the personal meaning is emphasized, we betray the passion for which Jesus was willing to risk his life. That passion was the kingdom of God, and it led him to Jerusalem as the place of confrontation with the domination system of his time, execution, and vindication. The political meaning of Good Friday and Easter sees the human problem as injustice, and the solution as God’s justice.

We Christians have most often overlooked the political meaning of Holy Week. The New Testament and Jesus do not simply speak of dying, but crucifixion. Suppose Jesus had jumped off a high building to illustrate that the path of transformation is dying. To say the obvious, this would have involved a death. But the way of Jesus involves not just any kind of death, but “taking up the cross” and following him to Jerusalem, the place not only of dying and rising, but specifically of confrontation with the authorities and vindication by God.

Seeing the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter can help us to recover the political meaning of Jesus and the Bible as a whole, a meaning muted in much of Christian preaching and teaching. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her best-selling book about the working class in the United States, provides a striking example. She goes to a revival meeting attended primarily by poor people at which the preacher emphasizes going to heaven by believing in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus. She comments:

It would be nice if someone would read this sad-eyed crowd the Sermon on the Mount, accompanied by a rousing commentary on income inequality and the need for a hike in the minimum wage. But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he ever had to say. Christ crucified rules, and it may be that the true business of modern Christianity, is to crucify him again and again so that he can never get a word out of his mouth.

*We Christians have most often overlooked the political meaning of Holy Week.*

She concludes: "I get up to leave, timing my exit for when the preacher's metronomic head movements have him looking the other way, and walk out to search for my car, half expecting to find Jesus out there, gagged and tethered to a tent pole."

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

### **From *Who Killed Jesus?***

The Kingdom movement was an empowering rather than a dominating one. The historical Jesus did not send others out to speak about himself or bring others to him. He told them they could do just what he was doing. They could heal one another, share their food together, and, thereby bring the Kingdom into their midst. The God of that Kingdom was one who empowered people, unlike Caesar, whose kingdom dominated people. The Kingdom movement, in other words, was not the Jesus movement, and to remove Jesus was not to remove the Kingdom. When he was executed, those with him lost their nerve and fled. They did not lose their faith and quit. What they found, even after his execution, was that the empowering Kingdom was still present, was still operative, was still there. Furthermore, and however one expressed it, Jesus' presence was still experienced as empowerment, not only by those who had known him before, but by others hearing about him now for the first time. Easter faith is no more or less a mystery than any other faith, but it did not start on Easter Sunday. It started among those first followers of Jesus in Lower Galilee long before his death, and precisely because it was faith as empowerment rather than faith as domination, it could survive and, in fact, negate the execution of Jesus himself. It is absolutely insulting to those first Christians to imagine either that faith started on Easter Sunday through apparition or that, having been temporarily lost, it was restored by trance and ecstasy that same Sunday. An empty tomb or a risen body susceptible to food and touch were dramatic ways of expressing that faith. Trances or ecstasies were dramatic ways of experiencing that faith. Risen appearances, as in the last chapters of the gospels, were dramatic ways of organizing and managing that faith. But Christian faith itself was the experience of Jesus' continued empowering presence, however one expressed that, however one explained that, and however one defended that in public discourse. It was the continued presence of absolutely the same Jesus in an absolutely different mode of existence.

John Dominic Crossan

John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 209-210.

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*Bill Dols invites your comments and responses to this Sunday's Workbench. You can reach him at [bdols@bibleworkbench.org](mailto:bdols@bibleworkbench.org).*

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