

Text: Luke 24: 36-49
Title: In Good Company
Date: 04.26.09
Roger Allen Nelson

Note: I am indebted to an essay by Scott Hoezee for setting me on this course...

Flannery O’Conner created haunting and unforgettable characters set in the decline and decay of the American south. Grandly and grotesquely human the people in her stories get a grip on you that you just can’t shake. One such character is a grandmother in the short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

This chatty busy-body old lady joins her son, Baily, his wife and three children, on a trip from Atlanta toward Florida. As they drive south she provides color commentary on everything that they pass. In the middle of the hot afternoon she recalls an old plantation with white columns and an avenue of oak trees, and she believes that majestic house is down the side road that they just passed by. And, with that, she convinces her son to turn around and take a detour down a deserted gravel road to see this mansion.

In these abandoned hilly woods, miles off the beaten path, with no sign of the plantation, her son is startled and the car careens into a ditch and flips over. In the chaos of climbing out and assessing the damage the family sees a big black battered hearse-like automobile approaching from a distance. That car carries three men....

When they arrive the men are gun toting and grim. The grandmother recognizes and blurts out that one of them is “the Misfit,” a notorious escapee from the Federal Penitentiary.

Then, while the old woman tries to convince the criminal that there is some good in him and that if he prays Jesus will help him, the other two men take the rest of the family off into the woods and execute them. It is a horrific scene. O’Conner writes:

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, “Baily Boy, Baily Boy!” as if her heart would break.

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead.” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t of done it. He thrown everything off balance.”

What a line! In the middle of a brutal murder the recognition that resurrection throws everything out of kilter.

Dear friends, Flannery O’Conner knows that if the resurrection is true, then earth’s equilibrium is unequivocally altered.

If Jesus rose from the dead then death isn’t the final punctuation point.

If Jesus rose from the dead then death is no longer normative.

If Jesus rose from the dead then death doesn’t hold last serve.

If Jesus rose from the dead then everything is different than what it is.
For, resurrection is not some minor miracle or a petty parlor trick, but
resurrection is a revolution that radically reconfigures reality.

If Jesus rose from the dead then everything is thrown off balance.

Aw! But, the dilemma is how to believe the resurrection. It is hard to swallow and hard to follow; it is hard to accept precisely because it doesn't fit our sense of balance.

We may like the idea of souls that slip earth's bounds and sail into eternity, but that's not resurrection. We may enjoy an annual celebration of life emerging from winter's icy grip, but that's not resurrection. We may embrace a metaphoric hope that life rises out of death, but that's not resurrection.

Resurrection is a body, three days dead, bloated and stiff with a stink starting to set in, animated again by breath, and rising up alive, as a resurrected body.... (?)

The dilemma of the resurrection is that the Misfit in O'Conner's short story, and misfits like us, don't know what to make of that reality. And, in that we're in good company.

Take Luke's resurrection retelling at face value.

On the day of resurrection two of the disciples walked away from Jerusalem for Emmaus. It was a seven mile hike. Bewildered by the events of the last few days they were surprised when a stranger sauntered up behind them who didn't seem to know what had happened. So, as they walked the disciples told the story ~ including the morning's baffling news of the empty tomb and the women's wild claims of angels announcing resurrection. In response to all of this the stranger, Jesus, weaves together an accounting of scripture suggesting that all of this was the culmination of the scriptural arc.....

When they get to Emmaus shadows are stretching out and the first hint of the night's chill is in the air; even days that change that creation come to a close. So, the disciples encourage the stranger to stay the night.

Now, something about their eyesight or his appearance kept the disciples from recognizing that this stranger was the resurrected Jesus ~ until he breaks bread with them, then their eyes are opened, they recognize the resurrected Christ, and he disappears....

Flabbergasted, with their hearts burning, they got up from the table, hoisted up their robes, and high-tailed it back to Jerusalem. Seven miles back. Seven miles at a full speed resurrection gallop. Seven miles and they burst into the room where the disciples are holed up. Dusty, sweaty, stunned, and gasping for breath they heave out the words, "It is true!"

But! But, before they barely have the words out, Jesus appears among them. They barely have a chance to offer details and astonished analysis when Jesus is standing with them.

There is no word that Jesus ran ahead of them,
there is no report that they passed him on the road,
there is no indication that he snuck up, waited until the disciples broke the news,
and then stepped through the door to confirm the surprise....

No. The language is that he appeared among them.

Whatever the quality of the resurrected body it was different than a body that was resuscitated. The resurrected Jesus doesn't seem to be restricted by the physical limitations of his pre-resurrection body. He appears and disappears. He materializes in front of his disciples in a way in which confounds and in a way in which they recognize. And yet, whatever the quality of the resurrected body, it wasn't just spiritual vapor or metaphorical mist. For, Jesus invites them to poke and prod, to touch and feel. He asks them to look at his hands and his feet....

That is an odd request. Isn't it? Not look at my face; not look deep into my eyes and you will recognize it is me; but look at my hands and my feet.

The hands that broke bread,
the hands that spackled mud on the eyes of the blind,
the hands that washed their feet,
the hands that were nailed to a cross.
The feet that walked in their sandals,
the feet the woman wept over and wiped clean with her hair,
the feet on which was poured out a fine and fancy oil,
the feet that were nailed to a cross.

Jesus is recognized in his hands and feet bearing the imprint of this world.

Now, I am not sure that Jesus is trying to offer an apologetic for a bodily resurrection, but he does seem to recognize that his hands and feet aren't proof enough, so he asks for something to eat. And, in words of Scott Hoezee:

He makes it clear to them that he is no ghost. He casts a shadow. He can pop a Mrs. Paul's Fish Stick in his mouth and it does not drop through his ethereal body and onto the floor but it is down the hatch and into a real stomach.

At face value?

The resurrected Jesus is spiritual enough to slip through locked doors; and the resurrected Jesus is physical enough to digest the catch of the day. At face value, Luke's gospel account is that Jesus rose from the dead as some manner of bodily resurrected reality. But, even with all this physical proof standing in front of them, the disciples, and I quote, "still did not believe it because of joy and amazement."

If you are like me and you don't know what to do with the story of the resurrection because it is so far out balance with what we know of this world. Take heart, you're in good company. Jesus came to disciples who didn't know what to make of it either.

Even as they looked at his hands,
even as they heard him chew,
even as they caught the smell fish on his breath....

Jesus came to those who were confounded with joy and amazement.

So, then again, just as he did in the afternoon, Jesus invites the disciples into a telling of how the whole sweep of scripture leads up to this revolutionary reality. Jesus opens scripture, and interprets scripture, and fulfills scripture all at the same time. The day starts with resurrection and ends with a Bible study.

And, that is part of what we're left with. The scriptural record of the resurrection, replete with mystery and nuance and beauty and by God's Spirit enough power to throw everything out of balance.

Back to "the Misfit" in Flannery O'Connor's short story: Even as he acknowledges that resurrection throws everything off balance, he adds:

"If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if He didn't then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

Dear friends, I don't know that we'll ever believe in the resurrection by physical proof or apologetic argument. I don't know that we'll get there by reasoned ascent or rational confidence. I've seen depravity and I've seen forgiveness ~ I haven't seen resurrection.

But, as Jesus was raised from the dead...
then with joy and amazement,
with some sense of trust and hope,
in the good company of the disciples,
may we throw away everything and follow him...

For, in the words of N. T. Wright:

If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense (then) it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world – news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts.

Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence, and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things – and that he will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory in Christ over them all.

Or, maybe better said by the Misfit:

He thrown everything off balance.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.