

I.

If you'd like, close your eyes for a few moments and come, experience a journey with your mind's eye.

As you gaze out the window keeping watch, the sun sinks into the western horizon and casts its evening light upon the old city. Mothers call out, and kids scurry home, their voices echoing in streets below. Men and women finish their errands, exchanging greetings with friends and neighbors as they make their way home and as evening descends upon the city. As you look out across the rooftops, the light drains from the sky and fades to azure to cobalt to indigo. The evening star shimmers. A gentle breeze blows, and the smell of wood smoke floats through the air as evening cooking fires are kindled. That smell reminds you of home and takes you back to where this journey began days and weeks ago.

It's your first time to Jerusalem, having walked from Galilee with Jesus. This Passover week hasn't been what you expected. Thankfully, tensions have calmed since Friday and that horrific turn of events. But it's been a long, strange day. Your heart is still heavy and uncertain, confused with the meaning of the crucifixion. Perhaps it was inevitable, you think. But now there's this strange news of an empty tomb and this equally strange, yet fascinating joy rising up within you. Could what the women and Peter said this morning be true?

As you lose yourself in your thoughts, there's a knock at the door across the room. Someone opens it, and in come Cleopas and his friend, speaking excitedly about another strange yet marvelous experience.

“Jesus has been raised!” they shout. “Jesus appeared to us!”

And they go on to tell everyone what had happened on the road as they were leaving Jerusalem and walking to Emmaus and how they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

Your heart jumps! And your mind races with hope and doubt, possibility and puzzlement. You turn to go back to your post at the window. And there he is. Right there! Right in the midst of you!

His arms open, and he says, “Peace. Peace, be with you.”

Everyone gasps.

“Why are you frightened?” he says.

“Why are your hearts puzzled?”

“Touch me and see.”

“I’m real flesh and bones.”

“See my hands and feet.”

“Better yet, do you have anything to eat?”

(I guess it had been a few days!)

II.

So what does Luke’s story mean, this second appearance of Jesus after his crucifixion? It’s kind of a strange tale, isn’t it? Fear of ghosts. Assurances of flesh and bones. Eating of fish. Whether you take the story literally or not, it can still be real and true and full of meaning.

Perhaps Luke’s emphasis on the reality and physicality of Jesus’ appearance is because of Luke’s emphasis on the reality and physicality of God’s kingdom. For Luke and for Jesus, the kingdom of God isn’t about ethereal, pious musings. The kingdom of God is about real things—about the sharing of food: bread, fish, and wine—about the distribution of riches to those who are poor, about healing, about table fellowship with those who are marginalized. For Luke and for Jesus, God is experienced in the real.

As Gandhi famously said: “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

Yet notice, in Luke and elsewhere in the New Testament, that the real presence of Jesus isn’t just in the thing itself. It’s not just in the bread and wine. It’s in the breaking and sharing of the bread and wine. It’s in the relationship, in the space in between, in the community built and shared among people. God is present in the space between us—in the action and exchange between people, not just in the thing, not just in the bread and wine.

So maybe this story about another appearance of Jesus after his death has something to do with learning this strange, new reality, learning the risen life.

I’ve been learning a lot lately, as a new dad. (Sorry, but I can’t these days I can’t seem to get a sermon in without a story about Luke!) Luke is about six and half months old now. And lately one of his favorite books to read (well I should say, to eat!) is a wonderful little book called Touch and Feel Farm. (Fortunately, Luke loaned it to me today, so here it is...) As I watched Luke manipulating the book the other day and touching the textures of the various farm animals, I was struck by how the tactile—touch—is such an important way of knowing, of coming to know the world.

In a sense, the disciples are children, children of the resurrection. They’ve had an entirely new, unprecedented experience, and they must touch and feel, see and hear and have a meal with in order to know Jesus in his new but very real and continuing presence.

The tactile is a way of knowing—of epistemology, as the philosophers would call it. Where do you touch and feel and see and hear Jesus in your life?

III.

It's true that we can only bear witness to what we have seen and known and experienced ourselves. When and wherever he appears, Jesus calls us to bear witness to whatever we have known of him. And then he sends us on a mission to make the kingdom of God real for all. God's incarnation in Jesus now continues in us.

Recently, the City of Portland released the results of its One Night Street Count. The One Night Street, conducted in January, estimates the number of people sleeping outside on any given night in Portland/Multnomah County. This year's count identified: 1,591 individuals *sleeping outside*, including 78 in families with children and 847 individuals *in emergency shelters*, including 175 in families with children. This year's combined street and shelter count was 13% higher than in 2007. And 37% of respondents reported that they had had been homeless for less than a year, including 21% who had been homeless for six months or less. Portland, like other cities that had been making great strides in reducing homelessness, is now seeing increases in homelessness since the recession began. The report concludes: "The recent increase in demand for rent assistance, food and medical assistance, and emergency services suggests that we may see an increase in homeless households in upcoming months."

In March, our very own Food Pantry served 1,655 or 59 people/day—that's a significant increase!

What does it mean to make God's kingdom real for those who find themselves in these numbers? What does it mean to give them an experience of the kingdom of God that they can touch and feel, see and hear, and have a meal with? If you want to experience the real presence of Jesus, break and share bread with someone marginalized and in need the isolated senior, the newly arrived refugee or immigrant, even an estranged friend or family member. If our hearts are open, we might even touch and feel something of the kingdom of God ourselves.

Yes, I believe that Jesus and Luke would want us to be faithful witness to the ongoing incarnation of God's presence in the world.

It's a spiritual practice. Perhaps the spiritual practice. To be loved and to love, in real and true and meaningful ways.

- Visiting someone who is homebound and letting your physical presence be an incarnation of God's presence and love
- Embracing a son or daughter struggling with an addiction
- Welcoming the stranger from near or far, driven by hardship or hunger.

Jesus' followers are promised in scripture: "You will see him." When and where do you see him? Where does the risen Jesus "appear" in our lives?

Jesus was crucified, yet he lives. He lives in and through us and in the breaking of the bread and in the telling and making real of the good news of the kingdom of God.

A prayer: O God, you surprise us with a life stronger than death. Guide us more deeply into this new reality and send us on your mission to make your kingdom real for all. May we be faithful witnesses to all that we have seen and known in you. Amen.