

# My Heart Is Stirred By A Noble Theme

An Eastertide meditation based on Luke 24:13-35

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Rudy Koop, during his recent stay in the hospital, wore an electronic device around his neck that allowed the medical team on his floor to monitor his heart. The device is about the size of a small transistor radio, is a transmitter of sorts, I believe, and if Rudy's heart happened to experience untoward activity the device immediately alerted the medical personnel down the hall, and the response was swift and expeditious.

I used a similar device during my stay in the hospital last year, but I could tell that my situation was less serious than Rudy's, since they placed me on the seventh floor of the hospital, and if my heart signalled a need for a response the device's signals first travelled to the aerials on the ceiling of the seventh floor, were then routed down to the Intensive Care Unit on the first floor, and if the personnel there weren't preoccupied with the serious cases in their care, they phoned up to the seventh floor. If someone on the seventh floor answered, they were told to find me, and a nurse, if free, was then dispatched to my room. If I wasn't there, they went, as time permitted, to look for me elsewhere. It was, in a strange way, reassuring, for it told me that they weren't really expecting anything serious to happen.

## A Stirring Story of Warmed-up Hearts

If these devices had been available in biblical times, and if you had attached them to the two individuals in our Gospel reading as they trudged toward Emmaus, you might have gotten an interesting read-out! For initially, their hearts registered cause for concern. The two individuals had been discussing the things that had transpired in Jerusalem—the crucifixion and all—when a stranger fell into step beside them, and asked about their discussion. “They stood still,” says Luke's Gospel, “looking sad.” (Luke 24:17)

Their hearts were “downcast” (Luke 24:17, NIV), “their faces full of gloom” (NEB), and when prompted, these two followers of Jesus poured out their hearts, sharing with this stranger their disappointment and disillusionment. “We had hoped,” they said, “that he was the one to redeem Israel” (24:21), but he was condemned to death and crucified, and so their hearts were heavy as they went over and over these events and how, if such-and-such or such-and-such had happened, things might have turned out differently. There had been a glimmer of hope when some of the women in their group told of seeing angels who said that Jesus was alive, but when others went to his tomb neither his body nor angels could be found. (24:24)

Then the stranger walking with them chided them, saying, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” (24:25) And the discussion continued, the stranger helping them to interpret these things in a different light. Their loss, disappointment, disillusionment, grief, guilt, and questions were lifted up by this stranger and placed in the context of a story much larger and more uplifting than their own. Sufficiently uplifting that when they finished walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus the two companions invited the stranger to continue the

discussion over supper. “Stay with us,” they said. (24:29) They wanted to hear more, and his presence was reassuring to them. Then, at the table, as he took the bread, broke it, and passed it around, it suddenly dawned upon them that this was no stranger. Maybe it was the way he handled the bread; maybe it was the way he blessed it and broke it; whatever it was, “their eyes were opened,” Luke tells us. “...they recognized him.... (and) they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, (and) while he was opening the scriptures to us?’” (24:31-32) Other translations of this verse read: “Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he talked with us....” (NEB) “...didn’t it warm our hearts?” (CEV) “Weren’t our hearts glowing while he was with us...” (PHL)

If the device monitoring the hearts of these Emmaus disciples initially indicated something close to a flat line, by the end of their Emmaus journey their hearts are registering regular and vibrant heartbeats! The vital signs are good, and the stirrings of hope are reassuring and invigorating!

### **Jesus: Stirrer of Hearts**

It may be my own experience and fascination with cardiac failure that alerted me to the use of the word, “heart” in our gospel story, where it appears twice, but it also appears in the other two New Testament readings. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that after Peter’s address to the people in Jerusalem, “they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘...what should we do?’” (Acts 2:37) Likewise, in our reading from 1 Peter, we are encouraged to “love one another deeply from the heart.” (1 Peter 1:22)

Now, to many the human heart is but a hollow muscular organ that pumps blood throughout your body. It’s about the size of a fist, weighs from ten to twelve ounces, is shaped somewhat like a pear, is located to the left side of the chest, the widest part on top, and the narrow point—where you can feel it beat—below and to the left. Incidentally, a woman’s heart weighs about two ounces less than a man’s heart, which may explain why men have more heart than women! The human heart is an amazing mechanism, a delicate instrument of which Kevin could tell us much more, but we all know of its importance to our bodily health and vitality.

To others the heart is a symbol of love, and on Valentine’s Day people send each other cards in the form of hearts, and use terms of endearment such as “Sweetheart” to indicate feelings of love for each other. Depending on the viscosity of our syrupy sentiments, the popular use of the word, “heart,” can mean anything from deep sympathy to simple infatuation and puppy-love!

The Scriptures use the word, “heart” hundreds of times, but have little interest in its physiology and even less in sentimentality. Feelings are acknowledged—the psalmist, for example, speaks of “the tumult of (his) heart” (38:38), saying, “My heart throbs, my strength fails me...” (38:10)—but in the Scriptural scheme of things the heart is much more than the seat of human emotion! When, for example, the psalmist writes, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart...” (119:11, KJV), he is speaking of the heart as the seat of memory. When the psalmist writes, “They think in their heart...” (10:6, 11), he is speaking of the heart as the seat of intelligence.

We often pit mind and heart against each other, but in the Scriptures the heart and wisdom are often synonyms. (Proverbs 10:8; 16:21; Job 9:4) Some biblical uses of the

word, “heart” have little to do with affect, addressing, instead, one’s intelligence or understanding. (Proverbs 9:4, 16; Jeremiah 5:21) Josephus, the ancient historian who chronicled New Testament times, often uses the Greek word for mind or psyche in place of the Hebrew word for heart. The heart designates the interior mystery of a person, integrated in all of its dimensions.

## **Stirred to Recognition**

The disciples walking toward Emmaus were experiencing all kinds of heart problems. A read-out of their cardiac activity reveals everything from downcast hearts (Luke 24:17) to wondering hearts (24:18) to breaking hearts (24:21), to slow hearts (24:25) and burning hearts. (24:32) When the stranger told the Emmaus disciples that they were “slow of heart” (Luke 24:25), one might say that he was insulting, not their feelings, but their intelligence! Indeed, when he first approached them, he asked, “What kind of conversation is this...?” (NKJV) Or, as another translation renders it, “What is it you are debating...?” (NEB) The Greek used here literally means, “What are these words that you are throwing against each other?” The picture is not of two forlorn followers of Jesus supporting each other in their grief and disillusionment, but rather, two members of the Christian community contending with each other over the correct interpretation of recent events. A modern therapist overhearing their animated discussion might have concluded that they were “displacing their grief” in an argumentative exchange, but no, actually, they were arguing about church matters that meant something to them in all the ways that a matter of the heart—a wholistic, biblical heart—affects us. It affects our intelligence, our understanding, our memory, our discernment and intentionality. The two Emmaus disciples were struggling with the meaning of the things that had taken place in Jerusalem. It was an intense struggle that implicated every facet of their being.

I have some appreciation for the intensity with which they struggled to interpret and re-interpret and counter-interpret what had happened and was happening. Earlier this week Dorothy and I shared a meal with the man who was the best man at our wedding, and whom we hadn’t seen for twenty five years! When he and his wife appeared at our door I recognized his aged face—he had called ahead, after all—but he was certainly no longer the young fellow he was at our wedding! The next several hours were enjoyably intense, as we caught up on our lives, trying to acquaint ourselves with children we’ve never met, sharing experiences, comparing illnesses—my heart failure and cancer to his multiple sclerosis—and even in sharing reams of data about the intervening years, recognizing familiar things in each other and enjoying familiar responses to each other.

Some commentators ask seemingly intelligent questions about the Emmaus story, wondering, for example, why followers of Jesus would not recognize him. Was their disappointment so intense that they couldn’t see beyond it? Was Satan at work, blinding them? Was God treating them like Pharaoh, hardening their hearts? Or was it just plain dullness of mind? Why didn’t the stranger just tell them, flat out, “Hey, I’m Jesus. Don’t you remember me?” Some commentators are so bothered by the lack of recognition they suggest that the setting sun prevented them from recognizing Jesus. Any attempt to dissect this story, however, still leaves a mystery, as do our own stories of spiritual discovery. Who can explain those holy AHA! experiences, those fleeting moments imbued with the presence of God? It’s like learning to ride a bicycle; one moment we cannot ride, and the next moment we can! You might be able to analyse it, but any analysis pales in comparison with the sheer joy of riding! Canadian philosopher George Grant, who despite all the things he had learned that mitigated against faith in God,

discovered one morning, during the war as he was cycling to work at a farm in England, that he got off a bicycle to open a gate, and when he got back on the bicycle, he believed in God. One moment we're a grunting unbeliever, the next moment overwhelmed with the elegance of God's design and providence.

Methodists recall the experience of their founder, John Wesley, who, as he was listening to someone at a prayer meeting read Martin Luther's rather dull preface to the book of Romans, "felt his heart strangely warmed". Sometimes Methodists are called, "The People of the Religion of the Heart Strangely Warmed," not a bad name for people who prefer an alternative to a "cardiac arrest" type of conversion.

Luke, in the story of the Emmaus disciples, is playing with ideas, with the concepts of hiddenness and revelation (24:16, 23, 24, 31, 35), knowing that for the post-resurrection followers of Jesus it was not just a matter of going fishing with Jesus. All of our attempts to pin down Jesus are futile, as his presence always dances at the edge of our awareness, sometimes present, sometimes absent, eluding our attempts to entrap him. One of the tantalizing elements of Luke's story is the report that as soon as the two disciples recognized the Risen Lord, he "vanished" from their sight! (24:31) The presence of the Risen Christ is mysterious, sometimes fleeting, and perhaps it is not accidental that the two Emmaus disciples treasured their religious experience in retrospect, saying, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, (and) while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (24:32)

Often we too treasure the Risen Christ's presence in retrospect, knowing only upon reflection that in such and such a situation he was there, with us. The same thing is happening already at the beginning of Luke's resurrection stories, when the women at the tomb are told, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee" that such-and-such, and "they remembered," says Luke. (Luke 24:6, 8)

Luke's toying with the ideas of hiddenness and revelation is related to the eternal and confounding puzzle Jesus left with us, asking us to look in the face of every stranger, knowing it might be him!. A beggar may be not just a beggar, but the Risen Christ himself! A prisoner may be not just a prisoner, but the Risen Christ! An ill person may be not just another hospital patient—the heart failure in Bed 419—but the Risen Christ himself! This enduring puzzle remains forever a challenge to Christian spirituality, and is certainly relevant to the current war we've undertaken. As the propaganda machine warms up, the popular media have been more than obliging, "Newsweek," for example, featuring the face of Slobodan Milosevic on its cover, with the caption, "The Face of Evil," prompting one of Canada's former ambassadors (James Bissett) to Yugoslavia to say, "I often met with Milosevic. I found him tough, astute, a very good politician. He's no worse than the others. The attempt by the western press to demonize him is nonsense." ("NATO's brute force an imbecilic policy," Ottawa Citizen, April 17, 1999)

A rabbi asked his students: "When will we know that in God's providence darkness has turned to day?" Replied one of his students, "When at a great distance you can tell the difference between a date palm and a fig tree?"

"No," responded the rabbi.

"When at a great distance you can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat?" replied another.

“No,” responded the rabbi. “Day will have dawned when you look into the eyes of another person and recognize there your brother or your sister.”

### **Stirred to Response**

It is interesting, and instructive, that after the Emmaus disciples complained of “holy heartburn,” they got back on the road immediately, walking all the way back to Jerusalem. “That same hour,” Luke tells us, “they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and...found the eleven and their companions gathered together (and) ...told (them) what had happened on the road, and how (the Risen Christ) had been made known to them in the breaking of...bread.” (24:33, 35)

There is, without a doubt, a liturgical structure to this story, evolving, as it does, from gathering (24:13-18), to an encounter with the Scriptures, (24:19-27), then an invitation to share a meal together (24:28-29), then the breaking of bread and the recognition of Jesus’ presence (24:30-31), followed by the re-energized disciples rising from the table, enthused and excited about the change of heart they just experienced and wanting to tell others about it. (24:32-35) The fact that Jesus vanished after the breaking of bread was not in the least discomfiting to the disciples; the fact that he was very much alive not only satisfied and sustained them, but compelled them to share the good news.

It’s not surprising that the disciples’ change of heart from despair to hope propelled them into mission. The heart, in biblical usage, is not only the seat of memory and intelligence, it is also the home of our decisions and intentions. It represents the will that conceives and undertakes our intentions and designs. “May (God) grant you your heart’s desire, and fulfill all your plans” (Psalm 20:4), says the psalmist. The heart is the centre of will and purpose. (Deuteronomy 8:2; 1 Kings 8:17; Jeremiah 23:20). To “incline the heart,” a common biblical expression (Joshua 24:23; 1 Kings 8:58; Psalm 119:12; Proverbs 2:2), is to express intention to comply; the heart represents volition, conscience and intentionality.

The Risen Christ stirs our hearts not only to recognize his likeness in others, it also stirs our heart’s response. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is like an implant, if you will, ensuring our hearts beat in synch with God’s own heart.

When William Willimon took on his first pastorate in rural Georgia, he arrived to find a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, he was told, by the local sheriff. Why? “Well,” said one member to Willimon, “things got out of hand at the board meeting last month, folks started ripping up carpet, and dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got so bad the sheriff came out here and put that there lock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down.”

Willimon was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor in his first parish, but found himself wishing he were elsewhere. He said, “I spent a year there that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, planned, offered, but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to...leave them behind.”

Several years later Willimon ran into a young man who was now the pastor of that church. Willimon’s heart went out to him, but, said the young man, “They still remember you out there.”

“Yeah,” said Willimon, glumly, “I remember them too.”

“Remarkable bunch of people,” he said.

“Remarkable,” said Willimon.

“Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,” continued the young man. “That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day-care centre they established is going great. And also, as you know, there’s not too many interracial congregations in North Georgia.”

Willimon could hardly believe his ears. “What happened?” he asked. “I don’t know,” said the young man. “One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.”  
(Told by Jerry Fuller)

It’s amazing the changes that take place when the loving and reassuring presence of Christ enters our hearts. How else does one explain a bickering church turning a corner like that? How else does one explain being filled with forgiveness for someone who has hurt you deeply? How else does one explain the reconstruction of trust after years of mistrust and anger? How else does one explain the change that happens within us as we grow in our ability to discern the presence of the Risen Christ in all places and among all peoples.

The psalmist writes, in Psalm 45, “My heart is stirred by a noble theme....” (Psalm 45:1, NEB) and then goes on, in a poem composed for the king, to extol the glories of his king. Likewise the presence of the Risen Christ, the King of kings, stirs our hearts in ways far more ennobling than the pursuits of earthly kings, and inspires within us that which is honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, and worthy of praise.

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.