

# Post-Easter Struggles in a Global Pandemic

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 April, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Elizabeth Watson

Easter 3 A

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24:13-35

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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**A Seasonal Thought**

**Karyn Burchell-Thomas**

We are some weeks into staying at home and some weeks more to go - and yet life goes on in strange and new ways and some things won't stop for us.

This week we celebrated Earth Day on the 22nd of the month. It was the 50th anniversary of this day. Concerns for air quality, focus on a global clean-up and communicating through word, and indeed, art were particular focuses this year. Church communities, and particularly clergy, were invited to make a pledge to keep the environment and the earth and its health and well-being in focus.

I signed up! Signed up for being concerned about the climate - and action, building trust in communities beyond, and maybe even during, coronavirus. Some of the things that took place this week, just to help that happen, were some online talks. And many still can be accessed. Normally we might have attended many of these ourselves or been part of rallies or written letters. We can still do all of that. Action still needs to go on, even though we may have to do it in a different way. The focus was called S.A.V.E. The S for Speakup, A for Act, V for Value and E for Educate.

Yesterday was Anzac Day. A time when all across Australia and New Zealand and even in other places - in Gallipoli and elsewhere - people would meet and give thanks, lest we forget the courage and the sacrifice. So we lit a candle at dawn in our driveway and remembered.

Cleopas and a friend were on the road to Emmaus - they too were finding they needed to do things differently, that life still went on even though they might have liked it to have stopped for a while. And they too were finding new ways of living, being in community and discovering Christ in their midst.

In all that takes place and all that goes on, maybe we will continue to discover and look for and celebrate Christ in our midst.

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Here we are once again, still in isolation in our homes, but each week continuing to celebrate our faith, continuing to participate in worship shared with our Pitt Street Uniting Church community and beyond. Strange and disorienting times. Uncertain and unsettling and testing.

And, as people of faith, we've also been sharing further strange times as we begin the journey through the post-Easter season of our liturgical year. One testing time on top of or alongside another. This is a season in the church's calendar that stretches us in many ways. The post-Easter season has always been a time of struggle, of wrestling with the big, demanding questions of our faith. It is not an easy time. We need, perhaps, to find a way to honour its complexities, the doubting, the paradoxes, and to glory in those very uncertainties and complexities - the glorious paradoxes of our faith.

It certainly was a testing, uncertain, disorienting time for Jesus' disciples. For them, it was a matter of finding a way forward while grieving for what had been ripped away from them, leaving them bewildered and frightened, traumatised, confused. They were struggling with intense grief but, at the same time, fearing for their own lives. They had hoped for something more, for so much more. They had staked their very lives on this leader! And now, here they are having to come to terms with his crucifixion - their teacher, their Messiah, nailed to a cross as if a common criminal, an utterly confronting death, messy, humiliating, frightening.

Dead.

Gone.

And they are bereft!

There would seem to be considerable drama here and yet the stories of this post-Easter season share a quiet, toned down, understated quality. Frederick Buechner describes them as unglamorous, with so little fanfare about them.

But I am also struck by the fundamentally human character of these post-Easter narratives. They resonate with our own responses to uncertainty, to things not working out, to fear, to grief. And, of course, to the heightened emotions and anxiety, self-absorption and listlessness, that have been part and parcel of our lives these last few months.

And, so, to the wonderful Emmaus story.

Every aspect of this story, every incident and detail, resonates. No wonder there is such a wealth of art and poetry depicting the journey to Emmaus, the supper, the return to Jerusalem. Think Velazquez and Caravaggio.

Many a commentator has picked apart the elements of the Emmaus story. The flight from Jerusalem where things have become unbearable. A primal need to escape. Two of the disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed companion, set out for the village of Emmaus. Why Emmaus? It is said to be 7 miles from Jerusalem, roughly a day's walk, but no more is explained. It would seem that anywhere away from Jerusalem will do when you need to retreat to some kind of safety, to seek out the known and the comforting.

And at least you're taking action of some sort. Walking is good if you've a head full of confusion and worry and grief.

And so, they walk and they talk and talk, and are utterly absorbed in their own little world, and while aware that a stranger has come from behind to join them in their journeying, they do not recognise that this person is Jesus, so great is their self-absorption.

The three travellers arrive in the village and the stranger makes as if to continue his journey. The two disciples urge him to stop and stay with them as it is getting dark.

Supper is served and Jesus, still the stranger in their midst, blesses the bread, and breaks it. And suddenly they know that this is indeed Jesus himself. And at the very moment of recognition, he vanishes from their sight.

How they must have wanted to keep him there with them, almost to cling to him in that room, in that humble abode, in the village of Emmaus. Even a few more minutes would have been glorious. But it is never thus with these post-Easter visitations, appearances, emanations.

Only after Jesus has vanished do they find themselves exclaiming to one another that they did, somehow, know it was Jesus even as they failed to recognise him at the time. The simple act of breaking the bread and giving thanks and they know; and then he's gone.

An ordinary meal, in an ordinary house, in an ordinary village. Yet a recognition of sufficient clarity and conviction that they are compelled to take themselves off into the night, back down a dark, dangerous road, to dangerous Jerusalem, the place from which they have so recently fled, to tell the other disciples that they have seen Jesus, that he was with them, that he is alive.

And so, what are we to make of this powerful Emmaus story. There is so much to ponder. At every point, in every detail, it speaks to our own journeying and our struggles and yearning. Our half-knowing and our searching. And even as we find greater riches along the way there remains uncertainty, perplexity, much that is unresolved and unresolvable.

Gareth spoke last Sunday of the centrality of doubt to our faith. He made use of Frederick Buechner's wonderful earthy quote: *If you don't have doubts you're either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*

Doubt is full of a restless energy. That can sometimes leave us drained. As with so much else in our faith, and indeed in our lives, we hold two needs in tension all the time – the need for times of retreat from the busyness of our lives, opportunities to look inward, to seek solace and calm and, hopefully, refreshment, renewal; and, on the other hand, the need for challenge, the need to look outward to our troubled world and hear the call to love our neighbour, and to care for our good earth.

In sum, we need replenishment, or we will be of no use to anyone, and at the same time, we are called to follow Jesus into the world – a demanding call, if ever there was one.

Doubt and struggle. And so much more, so much more. So much more!

It is captured beautifully in a poem entitled, *Lack of Faith*, by the post-War Polish poet, Anna Kamienska:

Yes, even when I don't believe  
there is a place in me  
inaccessible to unbelief  
a patch of wild grace  
a stubborn preserve  
impenetrable  
pain untouched sleeping in the body  
music that builds its nest in silence.

Most of us I suspect would recognise that it is through doubt and struggle that we grow in faith; it is how we have already grown in faith, leaving behind beliefs that have begun to make less sense to us or seemed to get in the way of growth. We have journeyed on in our own questioning way, testing each new insight.

And I suspect that we are fully aware that if all could be established beyond doubt, then, in a very real and immediate sense, we would have to believe.

There would be no choice. We would lose our freedom not to believe. And, as Buechner and many others have argued, at the very moment we lost that freedom, we would cease to be human beings. Our love of God would have been forced upon us; and love that is forced is, of course, not love at all. Love must be freely given. Love must live in the freedom not to love, in the freedom to deny, to discard and seek elsewhere. Furthermore, love, in its very nature, is risky. To love is to be prepared to suffer. Part of that suffering is doubt, even as Jesus on the cross doubted.

And finally, I think that we accept the reality that a mature faith, a post-Easter faith, accepts that all of life is uncertain. We live day by day, with uncertainty.

Yes, some people lay claim to the notion of objective knowledge, of facts, of proofs, but in reality, we humans are only ever dealing in probabilities and best guesses and more convincing ways of understanding complex phenomena.

And let's remind ourselves, especially in this current Covid-19 crisis, that science, the scientific method, values doubt over certainty. That is its strength.

It's what makes its investigations, conclusions, pronouncements, so much more weighty, trustworthy, dependable, important.

And we live with uncertainty in a more existential sense – we do not have control over our fates. In this, our faith is simply like all else we experience in life. We step out each and every day with a belief that how we've chosen to live makes more sense, is more life affirming and more worthwhile and more in keeping with all the things we've come to value, than any other ways of being in this wonderful but troubled world. But with no certainty, finally, that we are right.

Yet, although we may lack final proof, we have testaments enough. Indeed, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, now and from our past. And we have our own experience to draw on, our experience of attempting, day by day, to follow in the way of Jesus.

As to the disciples at Emmaus? What drove them to leave the supper table and take themselves seemingly without hesitation, on their way back to Jerusalem? According to the story, what they understood at the moment of Jesus' breaking of bread was that Jesus was alive and was here among them.

They had yet to fully understand what that might mean. But it was enough to send them out into the night, on that dangerous journey back to Jerusalem. Their Lord had vanished from their sight but was with them still. It was enough - gloriously enough!

And a final word of comfort.

That journey through the night, was a journey to bring news to friends who would understand, who needed to know. They journeyed back to where they belonged, in the community of disciples with whom they had already shared so much, shared their hopes and their dreams. It was also the group to whom Jesus chose to show himself.

The Emmaus story is, of course, a resurrection story but note how quiet the resurrection is.

Debie Thomas, in her reflection on the text earlier this week, comments:

*One would think that a God who suffers a torturous and wholly unjust death would come back with a vengeance, determined to shout his triumph from the rooftops, and prove his accusers and killers wrong.*

*But Jesus does no such thing....*

*Instead, on the evening of his greatest victory, the risen Christ takes a walk. He takes a leisurely walk on a quiet, out-of-the-way road. When he notices two of his followers walking ahead of him, he approaches them in a guise so gentle, so understated, and so mundane, they don't recognize him.*

She finishes her reflection bringing us back to the here and now:

*So very many things are different right now than we had hoped they'd be. And yet. The stranger who is the Saviour still meets us on the lonely road to Emmaus. The guest who becomes our host still nourishes us with Presence, Word, and Bread.*

Presence, Word, and Bread.

It was, it is, enough – gloriously enough.

## References

Anna Kamieńska, *Astonishments*, (ed. and trans. G. Drabik & D. Curzon), Paraclete Press, Brewster, Mass., 2011

Debie Thomas, "But we had Hoped", *The Journey with Jesus*. A weekly essay on the Revised Common Lectionary. Posted 19 April 2020. (Accessed 19 April 2020.)