

ENCORE IN EMMAUS

PSALM 116: 1-4, 12-19; LUKE 24:13-35

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Carol and I have heard a few encores in our day at the various music halls and festivals we have had the pleasure to attend over the years. But most magnificent was the encore cellist Yo-Yo Ma gave to a packed Kleinhans Music Hall eighteen months ago.

Mr. Ma is a youthful 40 year old. His reputation precedes him wherever he goes. But it's more than just reputation and musical genius. Some people have an aura. Mother Teresa, Ruby Bridges, Tiger Woods. So does Yo-Yo Ma.

You can't put it into words. Humble, sincere, he loves children. Like the episode on his way to Buffalo. Delayed at the Pittsburgh airport with a gate-full of frustrated passengers young fans noticed who he was and coaxed him to play. Which he did. Can you imagine. . . . "While our aircraft is being repaired here's a little something by Mr. Yo-Yo Ma." That busy, impersonal air terminal transformed into an oasis of life and humanity by the joie de vivre of a world class musician.

I mentioned the encore at Kleinhans. That night, at the conclusion of the concert, he insisted Conductor Joanne Falletta who was still new at the time walk ahead of him to receive the applause. When she resisted he did a little soft-shoe to nudge her forward.

To enthusiastic, extended applause he gave the admiring audience an encore. When he sat down and lifted his bow it was as if he was entering another world. The piece, solo cello, was spectacular.

When he concluded there was a stillness. You could hear a pin drop. . . as if the audience were still taking it in. The performer bestowed life on us all. Then *another* thundering ovation and rapturous encore. Then a *third time*: ovation/encore/life. It was unlike any concert I ever attended.

Today's scripture lesson is about an encore in Emmaus. Two dejected disciples walking late Easter afternoon down a lonely road to a small village. A stranger joins them on the way. "Why the long faces," he asks. "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened?" they respond. Then they tell him about a remarkable man, Jesus of Nazareth, who offered such hope and promise for all the people but was handed over by the religious leaders and executed by the Roman state.

At which point Jesus, who is the stranger, and whom they have yet to recognize explains to them the sweep of God's purpose and plan for the human family beginning with Moses and the prophets.

When they reach the village the stranger walks ahead as if he were going on but the two, still not knowing who he is, urge him to stay and join them for dinner "for the night is coming on and the day is far spent," they say. Is it not in our darkness when our worst fears overtake us. I know for me, usually about 3 or 4am I can concoct cancer or cardiac disease out of some minor ache or pain. "Stay with us," they urge the stranger who has warmed their hearts and bestowed on them the power and gift of life.

Obliging their request, at table breaking bread their eyes are opened, they recognize him and he vanishes.

Rushing back to Jerusalem where the other disciples are they share their story only to learn that their friends have seen Jesus too.

And as they are talking he appears before them yet again, Easter encore. They receive him first in fear then with great joy.

I want to talk this morning about encores – not just following great musical performances but also following God’s great act of resurrection. When Yo-Yo Ma performed his encores eighteen months ago in Kleinhans Music Hall the specific pieces he played were different but it was the same Yo-Yo Ma who played them.

So too with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The surroundings for resurrection change. First, an empty tomb. Then the road to Emmaus, then an upper room. Eventually, Galilee and beyond. Different settings, same Jesus. The sermon title today is Encore in Emmaus but we could as well call it Encore in Beijing or Buffalo or on the road to work Monday morning.

I used to get discouraged reading the Emmaus story realizing that after the disciples recognize Jesus he up and leaves them again. But I realized that’s not the point of the story. The point of the story is not about Jesus leaving, it’s about Jesus appearing – anytime, anyplace. The key is to have eyes to see him and ears to hear him. When Cleopas and his friend are walking down the road to Emmaus they do not have such eyes and ears. It was only after they opened their hearts and minds to him and invited him to stay with them that they saw who he was. Luke is telling us today if our hearts and minds are open to it, if we invite Jesus to stay with us – even though he may be to us a stranger – Luke is saying we will meet the Risen Christ.

A friend of mine recently shared a couple of such stories where Jesus just shows up – Emmaus style – to everyone’s surprise. The first story is about a student, an old man and a congregation. The student is Bill. Wild hair, T-shirt with holes in it, threadbare jeans, no shoes. A scruffy wardrobe to say the least. Bill is very, very bright. Becomes a follower of Jesus while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, buttoned-down, traditional church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but aren’t sure how to go about it. One day Bill shows up for worship. Walks in – no shoes, threadbare jeans, holey T-shirt, wild hair. The service has already started. The place is packed. Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. There are no seats. People begin staring uncomfortably, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit. Decides there really are no seats, then just sits down in the aisle.

The congregation is not happy. The tension in the air thickens as they see a beloved old deacon slowly make his way down the aisle. The deacon is in his eighties. Silver hair. Three-piece suit. A godly, dignified, courtly man. Walks with a cane. As they watch, people are thinking that you can not blame the old gentleman for what he’s going to do. You can not expect a man his age and background to understand some college kid on the floor. They just hope it won’t be messy.

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The preacher stops preaching. You can't hear anyone breathing. The church is totally silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. Everything is on hold.

Then it happens. When he gets down to the front of the church, the old deacon drops his cane in the aisle. With great difficulty lowers himself to the floor. Sits down next to Bill and worships with him, as he later explained, because he didn't want the young lad to be alone.

Everyone chokes up. When the minister gains control, he says, "what I am about to preach you will never remember. What you just saw, you will never forget."

The congregation is totally transformed. They move into ministry among college students simply by being with them. Wherever they are. Talking about whatever the students decide they need or want to talk about.

Members can describe that moment in church. They can tell you how different the life of that congregation is today. What they cannot tell you is exactly how an entire roomful of people was redirected in a nano-second into an entirely new life.

Second story, also true: the child, the drifter and the mother. The only family in the restaurant. Little boy in a high chair. Suddenly, the little fellow yells, "Hi!" Pounds his fat baby fists on the high chair tray. Eyes wide open with excitement. Mouth wide open in a silly grin. The mother looks around and sees a drifter. Tattered, dirty, greasy coat. Baggy pants. Toes poking out of what had been shoes. Unwashed hair. They are not close enough, but the child's mother just knows the old man smells.

"Hi there, big boy. I see ya buster," the drifter calls to the child. The parents roll their eyes at each other. Little boy continues to laugh and answer. Everyone in the restaurant is watching. "Ya know how to patty cake?" "Ya know peek-a-boo?" Nobody thinks the old man or his whiskey-soaked voice is cute. There is great silence. Everybody but the little boy thinks the old man should be thrown out. The family get through the meal but when they leave they have to go by the drifter. As she gets closer to the man, the mother tries to hold her child tighter, but the little boy leans over and squirts out of his mother's arms into the drifter's arms.

The next thing she sees is her beautiful baby laying his little head on the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes close. The woman sees tears trickle out from under his lashes. His hands full of grime, pain, hard labor, gently cradle the baby and stroke his back. No two human beings ever loved so deeply, so briefly. The man hands back the baby. "God bless you ma'am; you've given me the best birthday present I ever got. Take good care of him." The mother weeps on her way to the car. Tells her husband, "I've just met the Risen Christ." She works for years afterwards in homeless shelters and soup kitchens.¹

These stories are Easter encores just like that moment Cleopas and his friend recognize Jesus in Emmaus. If your heart and mind are open to it, if you invite him into your life like the psalmist this morning who says, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord," then you'll have eyes to see and ears to hear the risen Christ.

The season of Easter is not about remembering one resurrection that took place long ago. It is about all the resurrections that have happened since then and will continue to happen.

A venerable leader of a congregation sees Christ in a young rebel, reaches out and an entire church is transformed.

A precious, open-to-life baby recognizes goodness and mercy in a drifter everybody else disdains but in whom the mother of that child later comes to see the face of Christ and because she does she becomes a servant leader the rest of her life.

My hunch is if we were flat-out honest about it you and I might have an encore story or two to share today. Some moment when we were on some road to some Emmaus and met the risen Christ.

Just a minute ago when Jane Perry got us standing we did so because somewhere along the line in the life of this church, this year you and I saw the face of Christ.

We saw the risen Christ in someone, or someone saw the risen Christ in us.

When that happens as it did for that elderly churchman and his congregation, as it did for that mother of the precious baby we find *ourselves* resurrected in the process.

A friend says, as God invaded Mary's womb at Christmas and Jesus' tomb at Easter, so God invades our settled lives, enters our darkness, picks us up and sets us in new directions.

And we are changed forever – how we relate to our spouses/children/neighbors, how we vote in elections, how we spend our money, how we adjust our priorities so that hospitality and generosity and sacrifice take precedence over exclusion and pettiness and protectionism.ⁱⁱ

Eastertide is about meeting Christ where we least expect it, being transformed into the likeness of Christ in ways we thought least likely.

Let me say it once more. Easter is about you and me becoming more Christlike, so that God can prepare us for our final destination, the great banquet table of Heaven. Where we are joined forever with those we love and those whom no one seems ever to have loved.

Easter encores, like those of Yo-Yo Ma are worth standing ovations! Amen.

ⁱ These stories were told to me by a Presbyterian pastor and friend.

ⁱⁱ David McFarlane, sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA 4/02.