

Resurrection Imagination

Luke 24:13-35

April 26, 2020

A five-year-old took his first airplane flight to visit his grandparents. Shortly after takeoff the plane was in the clouds. With great anticipation he boy announced, “Mommy, I think we’re going to see God today!” “What makes you think so?” asked the mother. The boy answered, “Because God lives up here, you know.” Soon they were above the clouds surrounded by blue sky. The child said, “Look, we’re in heaven! I see God and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Great-grandma and Uncle Ken!” The imagination of a child: We’re going to see God today!

Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus are not so quick to see God that day. Even as Jesus walks alongside teaching them, their vision is impaired. In the fog of grief, they are escaping Jerusalem and the horror of the past week. They are perplexed by the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of their beloved teacher, Jesus. They are unable to see God in the midst of it all, much less Jesus right beside them.

We understand the disappointment and despair that blinded them to the presence of the very one of whom they were speaking. They had hoped that Jesus would be the one to save Israel, but their hope was shattered with Jesus’ death. The remnants of their hope were left at the foot of the cross. Now they are hopeless, unable to see beyond the present into the future.

At the dinner table the gestures of this stranger are familiar: he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Finally, their eyes are opened and they see Jesus.

These days we can relate to the disillusion of those disciples. We had hoped that our government would be prepared for a pandemic. We are saddened that the numbers of those who are ill and have died continue to climb. We are fearful of the predicted second wave. We are discouraged that ethnic minority populations in our nation are disproportionately affected by the virus. We are worried about the millions of people suddenly unemployed, so many just a paycheck away from personal disaster. We feel discouraged, overwhelmed by the implications of this crisis, feeling powerless to do much but stay home, wait, and pray. It is possible to spend so much energy wishing that things were different that we fail to recognize the good things that are.

It takes a bit of resurrection imagination to create an image of something that is not yet real, but not impossible with God. As believers in the risen Christ who is walking with us this very moment, we can imagine a world in which not only COVID-19 is controlled, but a world in which all people have access to health care, employment, food and shelter. God is at work utilizing the gifts and vision of many people to realize such a world. God continues to create and invites us to be part of that creative process. With awareness and attentiveness to God’s activity among us, we can participate in that creative work. And when it feels like God is absent, we can envision how things might change if God becomes present and active through us.

In the bleak days of autumn 2001 following the disastrous events of September 11, a landscape architect, Lynden Miller, practiced resurrection imagination. She wondered what could be done to brighten the dreary landscape and grieving hearts of New York City. A friend in Holland and the City of Rotterdam donated a million daffodil bulbs. On October 20th, 2001, 10,000 volunteers planted daffodil bulbs throughout the city.ⁱ In spring of 2002 as the beautiful flowers broke through the slush and snow of winter, they reminded the people of New York City that their lives and city would rise to new life

again. The Daffodil Project continues, sprinkling a gray canvas with resilient blossoms of bright yellow, symbols of perseverance and hope.

That's resurrection imagination – seeing the possibilities of renewal where all seems hopeless.

An artist doesn't look at a blank canvas and grieve the absence of beauty. The blank canvas is an invitation to create. A dirty moldy gourd is not just ugly rubbish left in the garden; it is a beautiful bowl, a smooth golden surface crying out to be etched or painted with images. A musical composition is not written to be left in silence on paper. It yearns to spring to life as instruments lift notes off the page and harmonize them for the ear to hear. The artist doesn't dwell on what is not; the artist sees what is possible.

Poet Denise Levertov suggests that the imagination is the birthplace of empathy and compassion. The failure to cultivate the imagination allows evil to thrive.ⁱⁱ The healthy nurturing of imagination enables us to develop empathy, to visualize what it is like to walk in another's moccasins. How might our world be different if we used our imagination to feel the pain of others, to enter into their circumstances, to share their burdens?

Many of us have experienced losses in the past six weeks. How might our own grief and sadness help us empathize with those who have lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost health care, lost food security? How might our experience equip us to empathize with those who live without the luxuries and modern conveniences we enjoy?

The gift of Easter continues, inviting us to partner with the presence of our living God to imagine a new reality. With resurrection imagination, compassion grows and lives change. We can see God and witness to the presence of God in the small acts of our everyday lives, such as breaking bread and planting daffodil bulbs.

I encourage you to adopt the mantra of the little boy in the airplane: "I'm going to see God today." Even in the bleakest of circumstances, keep watch for way God is at work, bringing new life out of old, birthing transformation and change. With resurrection imagination, even the impossible can become possible.

With Easter eyes, we will indeed see God today!

ⁱ <http://www.ny4p.org/daffodil-project>.

ⁱⁱ Dana Greene, *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012) p. 61.