

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 24:44-53

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The setting of the story of Jesus' final appearance to the disciples in the Gospel of Luke takes place on Sunday evening immediately after the two who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus had told their story and had heard how Jesus had appeared to Simon. While they were talking about all this Jesus appeared in the midst of them. He stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Now as a reminder of the basic storytelling dynamics of this story, the storyteller here becomes Jesus and is addressing the audience as the disciples. So when you're telling this story you, as Jesus, are addressing the audience as the disciples gathered with the two who were on the road to Emmaus. The audience is invited to identify with the disciples. The dynamic of the story is then that you are speaking to the audience as the thirteen disciples who were gathered together there in that room talking about the appearances of Jesus on the road to Emmaus and to Simon Peter.

When Jesus appears, their response, with which you are seeking to lead the audience to identify, is "fear and terror." They thought they were seeing a ghost; that is, they did not understand who was in their midst. Now there's a basic difference between your audience and the disciples. Because the audience has heard the story of Jesus appearing on the road to Emmaus, they know that it's quite likely that this really is Jesus. The disciples don't know. The characteristic move in these resurrection stories is that the audience knows something that the disciples don't know. That is part of the delight of this story. On the one hand, we are able to identify with and understand the disciples' response of fear, and, on the other hand, we know that in fact the one they're talking to is really Jesus, not a ghost.

Furthermore, the disciples embody the audience's ambiguity, and that ambiguity is essential to the disciples' credibility as characters. If the disciples had instantly believed, the audience would have been alienated from them as ignorant dupes who were being taken in. Luke's audience is intelligent. They would simply dismiss such disciples as naive fools. But as a result of the disciples' skepticism, the overall impact is to increase the credibility of their belief that in fact it **was** the resurrected Jesus who spoke to them. Implicit in the story is the recognition that belief in the risen Christ is only possible on the other side of an encounter with disbelief and terror at the presence of Jesus.

A major factor in the dynamic of this story is the spirit of the words of the risen Christ. What is the character of Jesus here, and how are you going to tell his words? What is his attitude toward the disciples and the audience? Generally the words of Jesus in this story are read with a tone of complete emotional detachment, as a pronouncement from a disembodied person. I do not think that this is the way the story was told. This story's field of discourse is the trickster stories. In the trickster stories the tricksters usually have

fun, sometimes at the expense of those they encounter, but the trickster's fun is almost always beneficent.

Jesus is here presented in the tradition of Jacob and Joseph. Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of the inheritance by pretending to be Esau with his father (Genesis 27). Now that's not necessarily beneficent and Esau was initially angry, but in the end it turned out to be beneficent because Esau accepted it and forgave his brother. The story of Joseph is more explicitly beneficent (Genesis 42-45). Joseph does not reveal to his brothers who he is when they come down to Egypt and he continues to put them through a kind of ordeal. Part of the delight of the story is Joseph tricking his brothers into thinking that he is only the second man in command in Egypt and only later revealing who he really is. The delight results from knowing what is going on. The same thing is present in Luke's story. Jesus is presenting himself to the disciples, but they do not recognize him.

Jesus is fully human here. That's why it is important for his words to be spoken in a way that conveys human emotion. Jesus is impatient with his disciples' uncertainty and fear. He says to them, "Why are you frightened? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. See that it's I myself. Touch me and see. A ghost doesn't have flesh and blood as you see that I have." Then he showed them his hands and his feet." And their response then is both joy and disbelief.

His impatience even grows, "All right, do you have anything to eat?!" And so he took the fish that they gave him and he ate it. What is expressed here is a crescendo of emotion. Jesus' words invite listeners to explore their own internal responses with a sly smile and a twinkle in the eyes. These words are in the same spirit as his words to the two on the road, "You fools, and slow to believe all that the prophets said." The risen Christ asked these questions in the spirit of love and understanding.

Jesus' words about his hands and feet are in response to the disciples' initial surprise and terror. They are the words of a person who is not recognized. It is like Joseph saying to his brothers, "Look at me; it's me, I'm your brother!" (Genesis 45:4) Jesus' response, "Why do you question like this in your hearts?" is an invitation to see and to touch. The disciples' response is never fully described. The response happens in the audience. The invitation of the story is to invite your audience to experience the delight and reversal of expectations that the disciples experienced.

As a result, the rest of Jesus' talk, his blessing, and the ascension, are all experienced by the audience as part of Jesus' response to the disciples' disbelief. The whole of the talk that follows their being convinced of his identity deals with their being commissioned. Jesus' first words to them are a reference to the Scriptures: "These are my words I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." And then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." This is Jesus functioning as a rabbi and pointing to the things in the Scriptures that prophesied the fulfillment of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Now if we ask the question "What are those prophecies?" the answer is: there aren't any. There are no prophecies that the Messiah would suffer, die and be raised. What is present throughout the Torah, the prophets and the Psalms is the transformation of death, disaster, and trauma into new life for the people, for the prophets, and for Moses. There are a whole series of stories that have the framework of the transformation of disaster into new life.

Jesus' final statement is, "It is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed." Now where is this written? It's written primarily in the Gospels. It is written in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Among other things, this is an expression of the celebration of the power of writing in the life of the early church and of the full inclusion of writing and the writing of the Gospels as a central dimension of the communication system of the early church.

Jesus then blesses his disciples, takes them out to Bethany, and ascends into heaven. It is the sign of his being exalted to the right hand of God and of his vindication as the Messiah and as the ruler of the world.

The invitation to the audience is to identify themselves as Jesus' witnesses, as ones who will tell his story. Luke shares this basic motif with the other three canonical gospels, all of which end with the commissioning of the disciples. In Mark it is the commissioning of the women. In Matthew it is the great commission. In John, it is the commissioning of Peter to tend and feed "my sheep." In different ways, each Gospel invites the audience to identify with those who are commissioned to tell the story everywhere.