

From Californication to Emmaus

Luke 24: 13-35

The end of the road: it didn't seem that far away. There was a look of pain and of fear on John's face as he walked toward the end of his street—a street that was only a few hundred metres long. His surgery was scheduled for the next day; he couldn't walk that distance alone. I was there with him. I was there as he spoke of the war, of his childhood, of his experience in a culture bent on entertainment and californication.¹ The stories seemed to flow from within him—a roll call of names, of places, of the experiences that made up his seventy years. We made it to the end of the road some 45 minutes later, and, then, we had to turn around.

Some people can't stand U-turns. They hate the feeling of having to turn around, of having to head back in the other direction. Others of us, myself included, are so used to pulling U-turns that we've stopped looking for appropriate places to pull them; any old corner of the road or gravel patch will do just fine, even if it does turn into a five point turn or the van gets stuck in the mud. Whether we like them or not, this life, which is but a journey, is full of g-force rendering U-turns.

On Easter Sunday morning, God pulls a U-turn that has everyone in his van caught completely off guard. Jesus heads down the road of crucifixion, down an Auschwitz-like path with loosed chains. He carries the cross of our shame.² He hangs there poised, dead for three days. And then, as if out of nowhere, God grabs the wheel, cranks it to the left, and turns the van around. All the heads in the van are flung to the side and the passengers on the one side are pinned by the weight of everyone else. I can only imagine God sitting in the driver's seat with this satisfied grin on his face and laughter creeping through his smile, as if to say, "Ha, I just turned the entire world around."

Just as that U-turn is being pulled, at the apex of the turn, we see two of the passengers walking to the village of Emmaus. They're discussing the events of the preceding days—the way Jesus was handed over by the chief priests, the way he died, the way their own journey seemed to be coming to an end. And then, without recognizing him, they found themselves walking with Jesus.

As John and I walked those few hundred meters back to his house, our conversation shifted. The focus changed (although it would be more accurate to say that things came into focus). John had spoken of being battered and torn, but he wanted even more to share his faith with me, to tell me that he could see the light, that we've got to kneel to fight.³ He wanted to tell me that life slips through your fingers, that some things are trivial and others pointless, but that, by the grace of God, there is a purpose, that we are saved from the awful sound of nothing.⁴ In those few hundred meters of conversation, my heart burned within me.

The two of them—the ones walking to Emmaus—were rather naïve. When Jesus asked them what they were talking about, they did their best to speak of the events of the preceding months. The two of them were there, or they had, at the very least, heard of all that Jesus had done, all that he had taught. They were there, and they still had a difficult time articulating the

¹ Red Hot Chili Peppers, "Californication," *Californication*, 1999.

² U2, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," *The Joshua Tree*, 1987.

³ Ben Harper, "I Shall Not Walk Alone," *The Will to Live*, 1997.

⁴ Smashing Pumpkins, "Quiet," *Siamese Dream*, 1993.

purpose of Jesus' ministry. The answer they gave to Jesus' question was pathetic.

Jesus turned to them and said, "You fools, how slow of heart are you? You've even heard what the prophets have had to say!" And then, in a moment of divine patience, Jesus walked beside the two of them, retelling the entire story from beginning to end, retelling the story with a resurrected Christ at the centre. Before the U-turn is rendered, before God cranks that wheel, he indicates in a quiet, but beautiful, way that he is there with them. Looking back on that moment, the two of them would later turn to each other and say, "Were our hearts not burning within us?"

On April 12, 2005, nine young people came and sat before Jubilee Fellowship's council. They were asked to share their story; they were asked to articulate how their story fit into God's plan. Their answers were pathetic. There was so much they didn't say, so much of the story left out, so much that wasn't captured in words. In some ways, those young adults were no different than the two people walking down the road to Emmaus. They had heard the story so many times and spent hours talking about their faith and God's plan; and yet, they missed so much. They still had so many questions and so much to learn. I can only imagine Jesus saying, "You fools."

He says the same thing to me every single time I step up to preach. He says the same thing to me every time I lead a small group or try to direct a conversation or step into someone's home for a pastoral visit. My words are pathetic, naïve; there's so much I don't say, so much more that could be said, so much that I have to learn. We are all just taking steps on the way.

As I heard those young adults share their story, my heart burned within me. There's a reason God created the world, and there's a reason his Word is revealed in scripture and incarnated in Christ. They are moments of God's divine patience. They're God's way of quietly, but beautifully, telling the story that we can't. As the nine young adults shared their stories, as they walked down the road to Emmaus, I was reminded of the story that only God can tell.

Christ was with us in that council room, walking beside us, living in us, reminding us that our pasts have been rewritten and that he's thrown away the pen.⁵ The Son is shining on us and the truth is setting us free and his followers are leading with a voice so strong that we are being knocked to our knees.⁶ By the grace of God, our hearts are burning within. Through his Spirit, he is stirring within us a passion for his name, even and especially when we don't recognize him.

As they approached the village of Emmaus, Jesus acted as if he were going further, as if he wasn't going to stop, as if he was just another stranger that they had met along the way. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you invited me in."⁷ As the two disciples approached the village, they invited the stranger to join them for supper and they entertained Christ completely unawares.

As John and I neared his house, he stopped and looked directly at me. There was no awkward embrace; there were no penetrating words; he just looked at me. I saw my grandfather as if for the first time, but deeper than that I saw Christ within him. As I walked those few hundred meters, I entertained more than my grandfather; I entertained Christ.

To the two people that walked the road to Emmaus, Christ revealed himself in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes were opened, and they caught not just a glimpse, but an entire rendering of the story that they could never fully tell. Their eyes were opened, and they felt, for

⁵ REM, "Make it all Okay," *Around the Sun*, 2004.

⁶ REM, "Around the Sun," *Around the Sun*, 2004.

⁷ Matthew 25:34-37.

the first time, the g-force of God's U-turn.

Through his Spirit, Christ is dwelling among us; he lives within each one of us. On that day, in the village of Emmaus, his revelation was limited to the two people that were with him. On Pentecost, Christ is revealed in so much more. His Spirit permeates our lives. Even our hands are not ours; they are his own.⁸ We are his body, his church. We are born children of grace, from the very beginning. There's nothing else about this life, this place, this space in which we live. Everything is ugly, meaningless, nothing, apart from his beautiful face.⁹

As you walk along the road to Emmaus, as you continue to tell God's story in a less-than-adequate way, Christ reveals himself to you, daily, in the breaking of the bread, but also in the embrace of a loved one, in the setting of the sun, in the laughter shared within a Profession class. He reveals himself to you in the eyes of the person sitting next to you, in the words of encouragement given to you by a teacher or professor, in the stars that are still just holes to heaven.¹⁰ God is daily pulling a resurrection U-turn in our lives, and sitting in the driver's seat with an enormous grin on his face.

As you are pulled by the g-force of that turn, spend less time arguing, less time worrying about the length of a worship service, less time fretting about the outcome of some exam that you studied hard for. Spend less time racing from here to there, only to find out that the grass is the same bloody colour. Spend less time looking for the perfect church and live within the one you have. Spend less time praying for a pastor and be one. Spend less time talking about vision and more time following one. Spend less time worrying about what others think and more time carving out a space for God in your life. Focus on him. Let God tell his story.

And when Christ reveals himself to you in the other, even before he does, invite him in. Enjoy and cherish his presence. I can't begin tell you what it feels like to be in the presence of God, to sense that Christ is by your side, and I can't prescribe it for you, but I have experienced it with you. There is nothing more amazing than standing daily in his presence, with open eyes and arms, seeing him draw all things together for those who love him. There's nothing more amazing than being struck by the fact that all our interconnected paths are not heading off to never-never land, but are being drawn together for his purpose, that we might enjoy him and stand daily in his presence and say, "It is true! The Lord has risen."

⁸ Jewel, "Hands," *Spirit*, 1998.

⁹ U2, "All Because of You," *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, 2004.

¹⁰ Jack Johnson, "Holes to Heaven," *On and On*, 2003.