

“Losing Faith and Reclaiming It”

Luke 24:13–35

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There is a long history of division in the church, especially among Baptists. Our first split was in the Horsleydown church in London in the seventeenth century over hymn singing, our most traditional forbearers refusing to sing anything but scripture itself or to associate with those willing to sing hymns written by pastor Benjamin Keach. In the late nineteenth century, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, William H. Whitsitt, created a furor when he claimed his work suggesting that Baptists go back only to 1609 in England instead of all the way back to John the Baptist. He lost his job for this “radical” claim. And we have fussed and feuded to this day over an array of social issues.

But sometimes it’s actually the God stuff, theology, that threatens to tear us apart. One of these concerns is the doctrine of eternal security or “once saved, always saved,” as it is often named. This perspective rejects the notion that a person can fall from grace or choose unbelief after choosing belief. Theologian Dale Moody, who taught at Southern Seminary when I was there, was in hot water quite often and eventually lost his job because he believed scripture says people can lose their faith.

I don’t want to get into the weeds of this dispute, or lose my job because of it, but while suspending judgment on the ultimate question, I must say that we human beings do sometimes lose our faith. We may be covered by grace, God may still be holding on to us, but there are times when we let go of God or at least our faith in God.

Sometimes someone in the church does something to trouble us. Hypocrisy, insensitivity, and meanness are bad enough, but the most challenging actions involve breaches of trust or fundamental dishonesty. We are so traumatized that we can’t separate people in the church from the God it represents. Other times it is something God does or does not do that is the problem. If God cannot protect our loved ones from harm, if evil and unjust people thrive, what difference does it make whether we

believe in God or not? And then, at times, we just wander away for so long that faith or at least church seems to have little relevance.

For two followers of Jesus in the story from Luke 24, something traumatic happens to make them lose faith. Jesus was a prophet, powerful in word and deed, they say, but he was handed over to be crucified, killed in a brutal way. Dying on a cross was not like being beheaded in the Tower of London. The latter was a privileged way to die, if there is such a thing. Crucifixion was for the masses of nobodies the Romans wanted gone and to use as a deterrent to resistance. They had hoped Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel, *had hoped*, but since he died in this way, obviously they were wrong.

So, even though they have heard reports that he might be alive, they don't believe them. They are in grief and suffering with PTSD. They are headed to Emmaus, a beautiful town seven miles from Jerusalem, and along the way they run into a man we know to be Jesus, but they don't recognize him — perhaps because they are traumatized, perhaps because the resurrected Christ looks different (In John, Mary Magdalene thinks the Risen Christ is the gardener.), or perhaps because God is not allowing them to recognize Jesus.

The latter seems unlike God, but the text does say “they were kept from recognizing him,” and when they realize it is him, he disappears. There is something going on here that we do not understand... or perhaps we do. Quite often we struggle to see what is right before us.

I think of a story I have shared with some of you about a time Dana's father was on a trip back from London to Philadelphia. He knew the woman who boarded the plane late from her limo must have been someone important, but he didn't recognize her and just said a casual hello. Later they shared a bit of small talk, and at one point, he gave her some unsolicited advice. She was doing needlework and Dana has done needlework since she was very young. “I've watched my daughter doing that,” he said, “and I don't think you're doing the corners right.”

Just before they got to Philadelphia, the woman went into the restroom and put on some makeup. When she came out, he realized he had been talking to Grace Kelly! Now he couldn't get out a word, but

when she asked where he was from, he said he lived in Louisville but was originally from a small town in Kentucky. She said the only small town she knew in Kentucky was Hopkinsville because her first playwright, Gant Gaither, Jr., was from there.

Dan told her that was his hometown and Gant Gaither, Sr. was the surgeon who took out his tonsils. She said she had food sent to Monaco each Christmas from a store in Hop-town, and Dan knew the grocer who sent it. It was an incredible experience. She invited him and the family to the palace but sadly, she died in a car accident soon thereafter.

Now, there are two footnotes I need to add to this telling of the story. This week I saw the boarding pass from the flight with Grace Kelly's signature on it. So, this really did happen! And also this week, I saw the house Grace Kelly grew up in, around the corner from where Ian and Brittany live in Philadelphia. So, it has all become a bit more real.

When Dan tells this story, the emphasis is on two things — how fascinating it was to meet Grace Kelly and how Hopkinsville, Kentucky, is the center of the universe. He has run into people all over the world with some link to Hop-town. But when I hear this story, all I can think is, “How could you not recognize Grace Kelly?” She had retired from acting, she was a little older and we all look different without our make-up or hair done or whatever... but still, I would have recognized Grace Kelly! I'd like to think I would have recognized Grace Kelly.

But there are many things right in front of us that we struggle to see, especially if we are not looking for them or if we are weighed down by grief and trauma. Our perspective narrows at such times. We can't see where God is at work. Perhaps this is what happens to Cleopas and the other follower of Jesus, but for whatever reason, they don't recognize Jesus. They have lost their faith, like many of us at times.

The question is — how do they get it back? How do we get it back? One thing the followers of Jesus in our story do is acknowledge their loss of faith. They are brutally honest about what has happened and where it has left them. They don't know who they are talking to at this point. They think Jesus is a visitor or stranger, from the Greek *paroikeo*, which means an alien or immigrant, of which there were many

in Jerusalem during high feast days like Passover. They were the people Jesus said we are to welcome if we want to welcome him (Matt. 25).

We might want to remember this as we consider our response to strangers, but the point is these disciples don't know who they are talking to, yet they spill their guts to him anyway. They do not try to hide their despair, and their honesty ultimately helps them recover their faith because it keeps them in a conversation with Jesus. In like-manner, acknowledging our loss of faith can be helpful.

It can be difficult, it makes us feel vulnerable, and we may want to choose carefully who we share our condition with... There are many things about which we are told, "For goodness sakes, don't tell your mother!" Feeling like we have lost our faith is one of these. But doubt kept in secret only grows stronger, and God knows how we feel anyway.

I think of John Matthis, a brilliant lawyer, longtime member of this church, and one of the kindest people I have known. Early in my time here, John came to me, saying he wanted rededicate his faith. He shared his story, how he had come to question many things but also how he had recovered his faith. He wanted to make this public for the integrity of his journey and to provide an example for others. He wanted people to know it is OK to admit our struggles. Doing so is a means of reclaiming faith. Long after John's death, I am inspired by his honesty and courage.

Acknowledging our loss of faith is important; so is taking one step at a time and moving forward. The two disciples in Luke are on the way to Emmaus. They are not sitting still. They have not quit living. As they talk with the stranger, he preaches a mini sermon to them about prophecies which speak of suffering and redemption. This doesn't convince them, they don't suddenly recognize him, though they later realize their hearts burned within them as he opened the scriptures to them. But they keep going all the way to town and invite Jesus to stay with them which leads to a meal where they recognize him.

Sometimes we just have to keep going, one day at a time. In the film "Shadowlands" when C.S. Lewis makes his first public appearance after his wife's death, a friend says, "Well done, Jack. Life must go on," to which Lewis replies, "I don't know whether it must, Harry, but it certainly does." Life does go on, this may not feel assuring in times of

despair, but it is reality, and there is hope in it. There are many ups and downs in life, we have questions and doubts, perhaps even lose our faith, but we can regain it if we just keep going. Knowing this is helpful.

We need not be cavalier about it. I think of a boy in a church I served whose mother told him being baptized was a serious venture, it was asking Jesus into his heart, his life would change. For example, he would need to treat his brother better. He said he understood, and he was baptized, but pretty soon afterward his mother caught him fighting with his brother. “Didn’t you ask Jesus into your heart?” she said. “Oh, it’s okay, Mom,” he replied, “I asked him to get out.” It doesn’t exactly work that way, but there are ups and downs, we just have to keep going.

So, honesty, even about our doubts, is a virtue, as is perseverance, but most of all, we recover faith when God does something to make us realize we are not alone. In Luke’s story, the disciples recognize Jesus at a meal. He takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to them. It must feel eerily familiar. We think of the Last Supper and communion, but Jesus has shared many meals like this with his followers. There is something in his manner, his voice, his hands that assures them it is him. He is alive, thanks be to God! He disappears immediately, but they are no longer in doubt. They believe now and share their belief with others.

These disciples recover their faith partly because they do some things to help themselves but mostly because God in Christ doesn’t give up on them. So it goes for us. The only question is as to when we will recognize what God is doing. I say this because Jesus doesn’t wait until Emmaus to reveal himself. He teaches the disciples as he has taught before. They just aren’t ready to recognize him yet. God doesn’t wait to offer us assurance either. We just have to be ready to receive it.

It may come during a celebration of communion. There have been times even as a celebrant when I have been so moved by the nearness of God that I have forgotten what I was doing. It may come through the wonder of creation, the openness of children, the vastness of the universe, or some human exchange that creates room for hope. But God will keep trying to get through to us until we are ready to see and hear. We can lose our faith, but we can also reclaim it because God never gives up on us. Christ is walking with us, even when we don’t realize it.