

“Tunnel Vision” / Luke 24:13-35 / 22 April 2012

I have a special love for this resurrection account from the Gospel of Luke. It’s a story about togetherness, and hospitality, and how we can experience Christ in the company of the stranger. It’s a story about the journey homeward, and the longing that we all feel—from time to time—for good company and a welcoming a table at the end of the long day. But mostly, it’s a story about vision. A story about how sometimes we fail to see the very thing that we most need, the very thing we’re pining for, the very One we miss painfully. It’s a story about seeing past our small cares to catch a living, life-giving vision of the bigger picture.

One of my favorite stories about seeing the bigger picture comes from the fairytales collected by the Brothers Grimm. Actually, I only know the story because Danny Kaye retold it on an old vinyl album that nearly all children owned back in the 60s and 70s. It was a record in an orange cardboard sleeve, with a cartoon train on the front, and the storyteller himself, Danny Kaye, peeking through space in the “D” of his name. Maybe you remember the story, too? It was called “Clever Gretel,” and it was about a girl who always saw the bigger picture. I’ll try to tell it without imitating Danny Kaye’s fake Austrian accent.

“It happened that in the olden times, there was a girl named Gretel, who liked nothing better than to eat, so she worked as a cook. But oftentimes, she had to be very clever to explain what had happened to all the food that she had eaten. In the old country, they tell this story of Clever Gretel:

“One day, Gretel’s master came to the kitchen and said, ‘Gretel, for dinner we are having tonight a guest. And you will be so kind as to cook for us two chickens as nice as you can.’ And Clever Gretel said, ‘Ja, master, I will make zem so good zey will melt in your mouth altogether.’ So Gretel prepared the chickens and put them over the fire to roast, and soon they were getting nicely brown. And Gretel called, ‘Master, ze time to eat ze chickens is almost now already. After, in a few minutes, zey will be cooked too much.’ And the master said, ‘Ach, the guest is late! I myself will run out and get him, and away he went, out the door.’ Now sitting alone by the fire, and basting the chickens with butter, Gretel began to get extremely hungry. ‘Tsk, tsk, tsk. My goodness, what wonderful chickens! I never saw such beautiful chickens in my whole life. Look at ze way zey look. I cannot stand to look at zem. It’s a shame nobody should taste zem before zey cook too long and spoil ze whole juiciness from zem. And what if ze master can’t find ze guest even?’ And deciding that, she cut off a chicken wing and quickly ate it. Then she turned the chicken to baste it some more.

“‘I really don’t know what’s the matter. It doesn’t look right to me. It’s, what we say here, cockeyed. It’s all lopsided.’ And she cut off the other wing and ate that one quickly as well. But now Gretel had to turn the chicken again, and as she ladled more butter on the golden skin, she said hungrily, ‘Oh, so juicy, so juicy. And by the time my master returns it may be dry as a bone. And that wouldn’t be right for the chicken.’ So she ate the whole chicken.

While she was still smacking her lips and licking her fingers, she began to take pity on the second chicken, naturally. And she said, ‘Well, what is right for one is right also for ze other one. For where ze one is there should be two ones.’ So she seized the other chicken and ate every single bit of it.

“As she finished the second chicken, the master came hurrying in. ‘Gretel,’ he said, ‘the guest will be here in just one moment. And I will go and make sharp the knife for carving all the chickens.’ At that very moment, the guest knocked at the door. Clever Gretel hurried to open it, and before he could even step inside, she whispered, ‘Run away. Run. Run away. Run away because something terrible is happening, what zey are planning inside. Do you know what is happening inside? My master is planning to cut off your ears. Listen, do you hear? He makes sharp ze knife to cut off your ears, both of zem.’ You can well imagine how this frightened the guest. He pulled his cap down over his precious ears and fled with his coattails streaming out behind him. Then Gretel hastened to the dining room, and said to her master, ‘Well, master, a fine kind of guest you invited here to dinner!’ ‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘Well, he just grabbed ze chickens that I cooked so nicely and worked so hard, and is now running away with zem.’ ‘What?’ bellowed the master. ‘With both of them? With my chicken also?’ And with his carving knife still in his hand, he rushed out into the street shouting wildly, ‘Not both! Not both, just one!’ But the frightened guest only ran faster because, of course, he thought the master was asking for just one ear. And Clever Gretel stood in the doorway saying, ‘Tsk, ts, ts. My, my.’ She smoothed her apron, and smiled, and went back to the kitchen to look for some dessert.”

I tell that story because it demonstrates the difference between living with an overarching vision of life and the alternative of living from one situation to the next, with mere tunnel vision. Clever Gretel saw the big picture. The master cared only for his chicken. The guest cared only about protecting his ears. But Gretel had a long term plan to keep her job and to keep on eating. She had a habit to support. (That’s the strength of any addiction—even a food addiction—it gives you a kind of a vision to live by.) And the vision we choose to live by, our perspective on life, will determine most of our actions, and attitudes, and words. But sadly, many of us either choose unworthy visions, or else we muddle through life from one small concern to the next, seeing only the joys and sorrows at hand: stolen chickens, endangered ear. We all need a larger vision to inform and shape our daily living.

The big picture! Speaking of big pictures, at the Carnegie Museum of Art, here in Pittsburgh, there is a very big picture of this resurrection appearance that we just read in the Gospel of Luke. The painting was a gift from Henry Clay Frick in 1898, and it stands six and a half feet tall, and more than nine feet wide. This work of art shows Jesus breaking the bread with those two tunnel-visioned disciples, sitting at table in Emmaus. A redheaded Jesus sits at the head of the table, a broken loaf in his hands, a penetrating look on his face. The two disciples are shocked and elated to see that the stranger they invited home is actually Jesus. The serving girl is just startled by all the weird goings on. The artist has a painfully long name: Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret. He has long-since fallen into obscurity, but he was popular back in his day. Interestingly, the artist painted himself into the scene. He’s standing back in a dark corner, in his late 19th century suit, hair parted in the middle. And he’s looking on skeptically, with his arms crossed and his hand rested doubtfully on his chin. Kneeling beside him, his wife and child also gaze at the risen Christ, but they stare believably, reverently. How many different points of view in a single scene? How many perspectives! And I think that’s one of Luke’s points in this story: We need a bigger perspective to live by.

The strange thing to me about the Emmaus story is that it took those two disciples so long to recognize Jesus for who he was. Talk about tunnel vision! They walked seven miles with him and thought he was a stranger. Of course, I guess most of us suffer from selective vision from time to time. Sometimes we see what we want to see. I remember hearing an interview with an elderly German woman who had been a young lady during the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. She was talking about Kristallnacht, that horrific night in the fall of 1938 when anti-Semite youths and soldiers worked themselves up into a hate-filled frenzy and took to the streets. They attacked Jewish homes, firebombed synagogues, ransacked Jewish-owned businesses, and beat or killed many Jews. All the while, the government stood by and did nothing. The woman was speaking about her own sense of outrage when her Jewish neighbors were forced from their home in the middle of the night and paraded through the streets. She said, “I said to myself, ‘If only the Fuhrer knew what was going on! He would send the police to stop all this’.” Little did she know, the people committing crimes against the Jews were acting on hatred that the Fuhrer himself had incited in them. She went on to say, “We thought he was a good man. We trusted him. We had no idea that he was behind it all.” To think that there were people in Nazi Germany who were convinced that Hitler was a nice guy! Tunnel vision sometimes consists of seeing only what we want to see. We see the things that confirm our pre-existing assumptions about people—whether good or bad. We see the things that prove the rightness of our side, the superiority of our way or life, the justice of our cause. Most of us have this kind of tunnel vision from time to time. From these small vantage points, we forever see ourselves as the good guys, even when we’re not.

But worse, sometimes we see not necessarily what we want to see, but the same confounded things we’ve always seen. Sometimes all we can see is a wrong that was committed against us long ago. Some old, old hurt. Some injury, or unkind word, or harsh criticism. These bad memories cloud our vision. And if we can’t ever learn to see past them, then everything that comes our way will look just like them. Life will be scary, and unsafe, and full of threats. Our perspective will be one of bitterness or fear.

For me, personally, I don’t typically see what I want to see on each new horizon. And it’s not the inescapable past that I see living itself out in each tomorrow. No, on my sightless days, I don’t even see that far. I only see the list of demands and duties that I have to meet on that day, the tasks, the obligations. A chapter of my dissertation to write by the end of the month. A sporting event I have to take my daughter to. A newsletter article to prepare. Sometimes the things of life are the very things that cloud our vision, making us anxious, causing us to lose sight of the bigger picture. On our worst of such days, we concentrate on all the things we have to do...forgetting why we do them, forgetting the original love that those actions should be born out of. Sometimes, we treat the very people we love most with a kind of hurried anxiety born out of our lack of clarity. And in our brusqueness, and our scrambling, and our sightlessness, we neglect or hurt the very ones for whose sakes we undertook all that busyness to begin with.

What we need—you and I—what we desperately need is clarity. What we need is a well-considered, meaningful vision of life, a greater perspective from which to see and perform all the lesser duties. What we need is clarity—a place of peace from which to see and carry out the obligations of our life.

Of course, the search for clarity is sometimes the thing that clouds our minds most. Adrenaline rushes, overeating, addictions, pornography. All of these things can provide us a vision to live by...even if it is unhealthy and unattainable.

The judge who is presiding over the trial of Jerry Sandusky is a member of my former congregation. It always felt strange to me to moderate a Session meeting when such an influential judge was sitting at the table. That judge has a personal credo for life that I was quoting long before he became famous. It goes like this: "Life is good. Love is real. Dreams are worth pursuing." Imagine the clarity that it would provide for all your living if you really did sit down and think through the things that matter most to you, and then you made those things your top priorities in all things. The judge chooses to dwell on life, love, and dreams. What three nouns would you name in your personal credo, if you had one? Family, promises, and prayer? Generosity, patience, and a good retirement? What matters most to you, and how will you keep from losing sight of it?

I must admit that I've never taken the time to develop my own personal credo. The thing that usually straightens out my priorities and gives me clear vision is twenty minutes of perfect silence and as much stillness as I can muster. Tunnel vision afflicts us all: seeing only those things we want to see, or the things we expect to see, or the commotion of our daily lot. Clarity usually comes when we simply stop to remember that we haven't yet sought it. And oh, how we hurt the ones we love when we act out of our tunnel vision, forgetting our love in the heat of the moment. Oh, the poor decisions we make when we lose sight of the bigger picture. And so, I invite you to take this one home and think about it: What gives you a larger perspective, a clarity that enables you to live unafraid? And in all the decisions that you must make, all the confrontations that you must face, all the uncertainties of your life, may God grant you the peace of mind that only comes from living with a sense of clarity and vision. Amen.