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'What things?'

John Dear | Apr. 8, 2008 On the Road to Peace

There they are, two crestfallen disciples after Jesus' horrific torture and execution. Fearful and grief-stricken, they're clearing out of Jerusalem and drifting toward Emmaus, none of which should bring the reader any measure of surprise. But then the story takes a turn. Jesus (his identity veiled) sidles up to the two and asks, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stop and turn. "Are you the only person in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened in these last days?" The risen Jesus then asks one of the most astonishing questions of the Bible: "What things?"

Now had it been us -- had we performed miracles, healed the sick, held aloft the banner of nonviolence, only to be abandoned, betrayed, executed and raised -- we invariably would have launched into a breathless account: "You wouldn't believe what I've been through! I was killed. Then I was raised. Now I'm back!"

The humble, nonviolent Jesus instead draws out his friends. "What things?"

I suppose Jesus wants us to tell him his story. He wants to hear our experience of God. He wants us to share our journeys with him so he can show us how he is right there beside us. This, he knows, is how hope is reborn.

Luke 24 keeps reticent about the details. But the reader surmises the gist of the wayfarers' talk: Jesus' apparent defeat, the agony of the execution, their dashed hopes and the plain fact that they do not see him anymore. And then on the air was a wild tale of an empty tomb. What to make of that?

They get the stranger up to date, and toward the end, their very grammar sums up their despondency. In the original Greek, a specific verb tense comes into play, the past pluperfect: "We had hoped..."

"We had hoped things would change. We had hoped war, empire and occupations would cease. We had hoped God would intervene. We had hoped justice would come. We had hoped humanity would live in peace and care for its poor. We had hoped death would not get the last word. We had hope; now we have none."

Try this mental exercise. Enter the scene; place yourself as one of the downcast disciples. Likely you will find their despair resonating in your own heart. Like me, you'll recall the many past pluperfects that have sounded from your own lips. "God, are you the only One who doesn't see what's happening? Nonviolence hasn't made much of a difference. Corporations still squander, wars still rage in our names, the American empire crushes the

world's poor."

"We had hoped. We had hoped Jesus' reign of peace would breakthrough here and now."

But now imagine this. The stranger tells us, "How foolish you are! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

Our despair persists. "Necessary? What difference did it make? The world brims still with injustice, starvation, war, murder, and weapons of mass destruction. We stand on the brink of environmental destruction. Nuclear weapons are stockpiled and billions are in poverty."

And: "Your nonviolent way has been rejected. Greed and violence rule the world. And the church falls into line. Afraid to die, in love with the culture of death, it keeps nonviolence at arm's length. Seems things are worse now than during your days on earth."

But Jesus will not cooperate with our despair. He embodies hope. He was crucified but is now raised from the dead, and he starts afresh with the two disciples, and also with us."

He explains again the story of salvation. He outlines the scriptures. He reviews the journey of faith from Moses through the prophets and the psalms to himself. He tutors them again on the biblical path of nonviolent resistance -- the very path that leads to the cross. And then to new life and glory He invites the two -- and us -- to understand the wisdom of the Paschal Mystery.

The Christ has not failed his mission, he explains. Death and empire have fallen. The culture of destruction is crumbling, the old world is falling away. Triumphant is the way of nonviolence. Christ has been raised. The God of love and peace is glorified. The new realm of God's peace and justice is at hand. Suffering accepted in love in the pursuit of truth and justice bears immeasurable fruit, if one only believes and holds out for the long haul. As Dr. King would later say: truth crushed to earth will rise again.

The stranger has the two travelers mesmerized. They urge him to stay and eat. There, at the table, he breaks bread and they recognize him. Jesus -- in the form of a stranger, a refugee, an immigrant, an outcast, a homeless person. And their hearts blaze. In their sharing with him, there is born anew in them a hope for peace, a hope Jesus ratifies. His valedictory words to the community are: "You are witnesses to these things. Peace be with you."

Here, to my mind, is an important story. It bears us along from despair to new hope. It urges us, through the risen Jesus, to cling to hope. Calls us to join the peace and justice movements of salvation history. Summons us to enter the stream of resurrection flowing through time. Draws us to spend our lives in the nonviolent struggle for life.

It also directs us to reverse our tracks -- to forsake the road to Emmaus, the journey of despair, and to return to Jerusalem, scene of the crime There hope and faith undermine the empire. And in fearless nonviolent action, we meet again the risen Christ.

So this Easter season, I invite you to look beyond the headlines and top stories of the culture of despair, a culture on the road to Emmaus. Let's ask ourselves: how can we move beyond the past pluperfect? What gives us hope? What makes our hearts blaze? What makes us turn around? Where do we encounter the risen Jesus? What inspires us to join the work of resurrection?

In other words, how can we be witnesses to "these things"?

For further reflections on Jesus' questions, see John's book "The Questions of Jesus" (Doubleday).# This summer, Loyola Press will publish John's autobiography, "A Persistent Peace," and they've launched a new website about it, **www.persistentpeace.com** **[1]**. Later this fall, John will undertake a nationwide book tour. For further information, see: **www.johndear.org** **[2]**.

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