

AColyte

April 24, 2020

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

(Linnea thinks that's probably Emoji)

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Approaching Crunch Time
With More Questions than Answers
And More Suspicions than Certainties
Trying to Think Critically
and Figure Some Things Out
April 24, 2020

*This was unexpected.
What do I do now?
--"Could We Start Again Please?",
from Jesus Christ Superstar*

*These stories don't mean anything
If you've got no one to tell them to.
--Brandi Carlile,
"The Story"*

*Take me to the river, drop me in the water
--Talking Heads,
"Take Me to the River"*

I went to a meeting this morning where several of us from Student Affairs, Institutional Advancement, and Academic Affairs talked about creative and appropriate ways to end this unusual academic year. We've got schemes and plans to recognize outstanding students and fuss over our graduating seniors in particular in this time of social distancing and Roomote teaching and learning. You'll learn more about that in the next few days.

As I sat there in that meeting, I found myself thinking about the "Road to Emmaus" from Luke 24:13-35 (what can I say? It's an occupational hazard).

Luke 24:13-35 is another complicated, interesting, and weird Easter story.

Reading it has definitely awakened my critical thinking bone.

There are details in that story that, at first reading, just don't make any sense.

It must be time for a closer look.

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The story in takes place between Easter and the Ascension.

It's is a story about Jesus after he rose from the dead. He's still around, walking and talking, teaching lessons, eating, and hanging out with the disciples and others.

Later – in Acts 1:9-11 – he's gonna ascend into heaven.

[“When he had said this, as they were watching,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.
While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven,
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.
They said, “Men of Galilee,
why do you stand looking up toward heaven?
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”]

After that, Jesus will no longer be physically present on earth the same way he had been since Christmas.

It’s important for us to remember as we consider this story in Luke 24:13-35 that we’re looking at the time between Easter and the Ascension.

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We also need to remember as we read this familiar story that Luke was not “live tweeting” these events as they happened. It’s sometimes easy for us to think of Luke as a reporter scribbling down notes along the road, or around the table where Jesus broke that bread, immediately as the things he’s describing are happening.

But Luke wrote his Gospel more than 30 years after those events took place. It’s not a simultaneous account.

That’s significant because it means that Luke wrote his Gospel for an audience of Christians who lived after Jesus had ascended; after he was physically gone.

Most biblical scholars think that Luke and Acts were written around 70 years after Jesus’ birth.

[By the way, Luke and Acts were originally a single document.
The early Church separated them as they developed the Bible--ED.]

All of that means that Luke 24 was written 37 years or so after the events that Luke is telling us about took place.

By the time Luke was writing, most of the people who had actually known and seen and heard the man Jesus had died. As those early Christians tried to figure out how to continue to be a viable community, they were asking each other – at least figuratively – “What do we do now?”

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Which takes me back to my meeting this morning:

As we come to the end of the Spring Semester, and the end of this.....shall we say.....*unique* academic year, we've essentially been asking ourselves "What do we do now?"

The semester and academic year are ending.

Finals are coming.

But we can't have Honors Convocation,
or the Student Affairs leadership Dinner,
or the Athletic Awards Banquet,
or Finals Breakfast,
or Baccalaureate,
or Commencement
in the next couple weeks like we normally do.

I think Luke 24:13-35 makes sense as Luke's answer to that question for the post-Ascension Church. "What do we do now?"

And I think some of the answers that Luke suggests can help us all get our minds around how to be #ROONation in the coming days and weeks.

I think Luke's answer has to do with

- Community
- Narrative and
- Ritual.

Let me show you why I think so.

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Earlier in Luke 24, on Easter morning,

- women went to Jesus' tomb and found it empty
- "Two men in dazzling clothes" asked them "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"
- and then tell them "He is not here, but has risen"

Then the women went back to tell the apostles what they'd seen.

The apostles didn't believe them and Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself.

He stooped, looked in, saw nothing but folded linens--no people--and then went home "amazed at what he had seen."

I know that's kind of a long introduction, but that's where we are when this story starts.

*13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called
Emmaus,
about seven miles from Jerusalem,
14 and talking with each other
about all these things that had happened.*

"Two of them" are walking to a village called Emmaus.

This is not the story of anybody's individual experience. The whole story takes place in the context of a community.

There are 39 third person plural pronouns in this story.

Whatever else Luke might want to tell the early church in response to their "What do we do now?" question, he starts by encouraging them to stay together and ask their questions, and seek their answers, together.

This is a "plural" story. It's about a community.

As we at Austin College ask ourselves "What do we now?", we will do well to remember that—like the characters in Luke's story—we also can't fully understand our individual experiences in this strange time apart from our common story.

Whatever else we are, we are all part of a particular community.

We did this on purpose.

That's part of why you're still reading this.

We are Austin College people--#ROONation.

So, even though we are not physically in the same place, and we have not had identical experiences in the last few weeks, we will do well to remember that we are all part of a single, specific community.

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So this story in Luke 24 begins with a community, as two people are walking together toward Emmaus.

And they're talking.

Pay attention to how much talking goes on in this story. There are 20 verbs in this passage that imply that somebody's talking about something.

It's kind of a loud story.

*15 While they were talking and discussing,
Jesus himself came near and went with them,*

Jesus shows up when the disciples are talking about him. And he continues to walk with them.

Mark that.

16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

This is one of the weird parts of this story.

Why were their eyes kept from recognizing him?

We don't know.

But I wonder if it might be important for Luke to introduce this idea that just because you can't see Jesus doesn't necessarily mean he's not there.

I think that may be part of his agenda for writing this story the way he does.

What if Luke is suggesting that you don't have to be able to see or touch Jesus to recognize that your particular story is part of his story?

What if you don't have to be physically present on the AC campus right now to recognize that your particular story is part of the much bigger Austin College story?

Even now.

*17 And he said to them,
"What are you discussing with each other
while you walk along?"*

The disciples are telling their stories to each other.

And this person who they think is a stranger asks them about the story/stories they are telling.

They stood still, looking sad.

It's a sad story.

Their friend and leader had been betrayed, arrested, unjustly convicted, and executed.

As we've discussed in the last few weeks, our current Coronavirus, social distancing, Roomote learning situation has involved multiple sad stories.

There are all sorts of things that we had planned for this Spring that we haven't been able to do.

There have been times in the last few weeks when many of us have "stood still, looking sad."

*18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him,
"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem
who does not know the things
that have taken place there in these days?"*

That's kind of an obnoxious response to a legitimate question.

"You idiot. Everybody knows that."

But watch now as Jesus gives Cleopas and the Other One a chance to tell their common story.

*19 He asked them, "What things?"
They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,*

*who was a prophet mighty in deed and word
before God and all the people,
20 and how our chief priests and leaders
handed him over to be condemned to death
and crucified him.
21 But we had hoped
that he was the one to redeem Israel.*

By asking the two walkers to tell the story of the events in Jerusalem, Jesus gives them the opportunity to locate their specific stories about Jesus in the larger context of the story of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

All of a sudden, they're not just telling their own particular stories, they're talking about prophets, and redemption, and God's promise to redeem Israel.

They're still telling their own particular stories, but they can't really do that without also mentioning the Bible.

Knowing the vocabulary and categories and narrative of their community helps them understand and tell their own stories.

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A couple weeks ago, the AC Alumni Board created an "Austin College Alumni Community" Facebook page. As of today, it has 12,775 Likes!

There are threads on that page about

- JanTerm stories,
- Athletics,
- Study Abroad experiences,
- ACTivators,
- Exit 61,
- Greek organizations,
- The A Cappella Choir,

and all sorts of other unique Austin College things.

Each post represents an individual story.

But, taken together, all those posts make up a larger Austin College story.

Our common Austin College story provides the vocabulary and categories for many of our individual stories.

*Yes, and besides all this,
it is now the third day since these things took place.
22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us.
They were at the tomb early this morning,
23 and when they did not find his body there,
they came back and told us
that they had indeed seen a vision of angels
who said that he was alive.
24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb
and found it just as the women had said;
but they did not see him."*

After locating the story of Jesus' ministry in the larger history of their faith community – by using the vocabulary of the only Bible that they knew – now the disciples are sharing the news that this same Jesus has risen from the dead.

They don't really realize that that's what they've been doing; but Jesus does.

They are adding something new to that larger story.

*25 Then he said to them,
"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart
to believe all that the prophets have declared!
26 Was it not necessary
that the Messiah should suffer these things
and then enter into his glory?"
27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets,
he interpreted to them
the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

"I can't believe you didn't see this coming."

"Don't you know your Bible?"

"That's me."

"I'm him."

Just in case we missed the point before, Jesus makes explicit the connection between himself and all the Hebrew Scriptures--all the ancient promises of a Messiah.

He locates his story in that larger story.

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Think about this:

- We've had nothing but remote teaching and learning for the last half of the Spring semester.
- The Service Station is coordinating remote and online service activities this Spring.
- The Academic Skills Center has hosted multiple Virtual Tutoring sessions in the last few weeks.
- We're going to have a virtual Baccalaureate service in a couple weeks.
- We're going to have Commencement, but not until August 9.

None of those things have happened before around here. We haven't done any of those specific things before (remote teaching & learning, virtual Service Station activities, remote Academic Skills Center tutoring, virtual Baccalaureate, or Commencement in August).

But none of them would make any sense apart from our larger common Austin College story.

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So at this point in the Luke story, at the end of verse 27,

- Cleopas and the Other One are talking to each other about Jesus.
- They meet a stranger who asks them about Jesus so they tell their stories to him.
- And they can't really tell their own stories without also using the vocabulary and categories of their common narrative.

After emphasizing the communal nature of this story at the beginning, Luke now answers the "What do we do now?" question of the early church by pointing out the relationship between their particular stories and the larger narrative in which they all participate together.

So far, this story is about **Community** and **Narrative**.

But Luke's not finished yet.

*28 As they came near the village to which they were going,
he walked ahead as if he were going on.*

It looks like Jesus is leaving.

Like he left at the Ascension

*29 But they urged him strongly, saying,
"Stay with us, because it is almost evening
and the day is now nearly over."
So he went in to stay with them.*

Jesus' followers asked him to stay.

And he did!

"Let's keep this going."

*30 When he was at the table with them,
he took bread,
blessed and broke it,
and gave it to them.*

It's kind of a big deal that the risen Christ eats in this story.

Luke thinks this detail is important because it shows that Jesus is still a person

- Not a ghost
- Not an angel
- Not a hologram
- Not a fantasy
- A flesh & blood human who gets hungry.

The things we decided and planned in that meeting this morning are important because they show that that Austin College will still end this year by recognizing outstanding students, having a Baccalaureate Service, and physically awarding diplomas in person to every 2020 graduate.

*31 Then their eyes were opened,
and they recognized him;*

The community recognized Jesus when they were gathered around the Table and sharing bread.

The first century church could do that.

The contemporary church still does that.

Austin College has a service like that, where bread is broken, every week.

and he vanished from their sight.

Poof.

He vanished.

That Easter night community couldn't see him any more.

Neither could the early Church.

Neither can we.

*32 They said to each other,
"Were not our hearts burning within us
while he was talking to us on the road,
while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

"When we were together,
telling our stories to each other,
and reminding each other of our common story,
didn't we feel like we were being addressed from beyond ourselves? Didn't we feel
like we were part of something big?"

*33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem;
and they found the eleven and their companions
gathered together.*

*34 They were saying,
"The Lord has risen indeed,*

and he has appeared to Simon!"
35 Then they told what had happened on the road,
and how he had been made known to them
in the breaking of the bread.

Cleopas and the Other One went home and told their stories.

They talked about how they finally recognized the connection between their particular stories and the larger Christian narrative that they were all part of. That connection became clear to them as they participated in that common meal;
that common, particular activity
that took place at a particular time
in a particular place.

Participation in that ritual – breaking bread together – helped them locate their particular stories in a larger narrative.

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Do you remember the “Differences Among Us” session in your first-year Opening of School weekend at AC?
or “Risky Choices”?
or Lake Campus games?
or “First We Serve”?
or Opening Convocation?

Those are rituals.

They are ways for individual Austin College students to participate *together* in *particular* activities,
at a *particular* time,
in a *particular* place.

We have a lot of those rituals for students as you enter our community.

And we have another set of rituals as you head out.

Our Departure Rituals are complicated this year.

We can't be together right now.

But we're not giving up.

We will mark the end of the semester and academic year in some ways that are both brand new and absolutely consistent with the larger Austin College story.

We will continue to provide ways for current students – and particularly seniors – to embrace and celebrate this time of transition and completion and accomplishment.

Years from now, Austin College people will still be telling stories about this strange time.

And about the resilience of the Class of 2020 (and their younger colleagues).

And those future AC folks will think about how *their* stories are somehow related to *our* story.

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So, What Do We Do Now?

Let's continue to live out our individual stories in a way that contributes to a larger story in which people who we don't even know will someday be able to find meaning for themselves in their particular lives.

To quote President O'Day:

Let's Finish strong.

Until next time,
I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Pretty Sure Y'all are Gonna be some Obnoxious Golden Roos,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain