

Your Lourdes Easter Week Special

“Weren’t our hearts on fire?”

The Road to Emmaus Story of Luke
Retold in the Cotton Patch Gospel

As a special bonus for all those in the Lourdes family who are sheltering in place these days, we offer a story of hope and astonishment. This special proclamation has been videoed by a special actor expressly for you: Tom Key of the Lourdes congregation and long of the Atlanta theater world. But first here’s some context.

Of all the episodes of Jesus appearing to groups of disciples after his Resurrection, “The Road to Emmaus” story is the most beloved and engaging. A multitude of emotions and meaning thread through this simple tale of walking and talking with an amiable but questioning stranger, and then breaking bread with him at journey’s end. The two disciples (one named Cleopas and the other unnamed) are slipping away from Jerusalem after all the “things that have taken place” – the crucifixion and then the astonishing news from the women of the empty tomb and angels materializing with messages. They were on an emotional roller coaster of dejection and fear, skepticism and wonderment, hope and despair.

This tale of “unrecognized identity” has layers of meaning. On the surface it’s an archetypal story of the Mysterious Stranger, who in this case becomes known but only after he’s gone. It’s also a window into the wider world of Jesus’ disciples – there were more than the 12 Apostles. And was that “unnamed disciple” a woman? Then, probably most important, it’s a narrative that describes what we do in Sunday Mass where there are two tables of mercy – the Table of the Word and the Table of the Eucharist. We break open the word as does the stranger while on the Road to Emmaus, and we, like that mystery person, break bread together. In fact, the Unknown traveling companion performs the four actions of the Eucharist: take, bless, break and give. And [Spoiler Alert] as soon as they see him break the bread, they recognize who he is. And poof, he’s gone.

This classic story has inspired artists across the ages. We have icons from the Sixth Century from Ethiopian churches of this scene. This Scripture is depicted in the wonderful set of Biblical pictures from 20th century West Cameroon that we use in our bulletin and worship aid. European artists down through the ages have been drawn to this story, including Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Dürer, Tintoretto, Titian, Velásquez and Vermeer. All of these images show the disciples in their oblivious “period of unknowing” with whom it was they were conversing on the road. That moment is captured just before their souls flood with enthusiasm and joy.

Writers across the centuries have embraced this story. Perhaps one of the most creative retellings of this passage was by the Rev. Dr. Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Gospel of Luke and Acts (1969). A farmer and New Testament Greek scholar, Jordan was the founder of Koinonia Farm, a small but influential integrated religious community in southwest Georgia near Americus and Plains. He’s widely known as the author of the Cotton Patch paraphrase of the New Testament. He was also instrumental in the founding of Habitat for Humanity. Jordan was born in Talbotton, Georgia, and earned a degree in agriculture from the University of Georgia in 1933 and a doctoral degree in Scripture from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky in 1938.

Jordan was a founder of Koinonia Farm four years later. The Christian commune was inspired by the description of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42-47 – which happens to be our first reading this Sunday, April 19th. “Koinonia” means communion or fellowship, and its what early Christians called their house church gatherings. The Koinonia partners “bound themselves to the equality of all persons, rejection of violence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of possessions.”

And that led to trouble in those last days of the Jim Crow South. The group was boycotted and besieged with bombings and random shotgun blasts. But they hung on, and by the late 1960’s the hostilities had subsided. During this period, he worked on his paraphrases of the New Testament, which were almost complete when he died in 1969. [By the way, Fr. Bruce stayed on Koinonia Farm in the summer of 1961 when as a teenager he was on a

pilgrimage of the South to visit Black churches in the United Church of Christ tradition. His home church youth group in South Milwaukee used to sell pecans from Koinonia Farm as a fund-raiser.]

In the Cotton Patch Gospel, Jordan believed it was necessary not only to translate individual words and phrases, but also the context of Scripture. Jordan converted all references to “crucifixion” into references to “lynching,” believing that no other term was adequate for conveying the sense of the event into a modern American speech:

there just isn't any word in our vocabulary which adequately translates the Greek word for “crucifixion.” *Our* crosses are so shined, so polished, so respectable that to be impaled on one of them would seem to be a blessed experience. We have thus emptied the term “crucifixion” of its original content of terrific emotion, of violence, of indignity and stigma, of defeat. I have translated it as “lynching,” well aware that this is not technically correct. Jesus was officially tried and legally condemned, elements generally lacking in a lynching. But having observed the operation of Southern “justice,” and at times having been its victim, I can testify that more people have been lynched “by judicial action” than by unofficial ropes. Pilate at least had the courage and the honesty to publicly wash his hands and disavow all legal responsibility. “See to it yourselves,” he told the mob. And they did. They crucified him in Judea and they strung him up in Georgia, with a noose tied to a pine tree. [from his introduction to The Cotton Patch Version of Paul’s Epistles]

Doesn’t this description – written 50 years ago – sound like it could apply to some corners of our world today?

The Cotton Patch series also used American analogies for place names from the New Testament: Rome became Washington, D.C., Judaea became Georgia (the Governor of Judaea became the Governor of Georgia), Jerusalem became Atlanta, Bethlehem became Gainesville, Georgia, and Emmaus became Austell, Georgia.

This exciting book is brimming with theatre. And Lourdes parishioner and Atlanta theatre world icon Tom Key recognized the potency of the material. The result is “Cotton Patch Gospel” – a

musical by Tom Key and Russell Treyz with music and lyrics written by Harry Chapin. It ran off-Broadway at the Lamb's Theatre for 193 performances beginning in October 21, 1981. Using a southern reinterpretation of the gospel story, the musical is often performed in a one-man show format with an accompanying quartet of bluegrass musicians, although a larger cast can also be used. A video recording of the play was released in 1988 with Tom Key as the leading actor.

Tom Key has served as Artistic Director of Theatrical Outfit since 1995 where his drive to tell “Stories That Stir The Soul” in the heart of downtown Atlanta has developed the company into one of our city’s major performing arts institutions.

He has appeared in over a 100 productions from off-Broadway to Los Angeles including: Alliance Theater (*Art, Grapes of Wrath, Candide, A Christmas Carol*), The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (*The Defiant Requiem*), Kenny Leon’s True Colors Theater and Arena Stage in Washington DC (*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*), The Atlanta Opera (*Out of Darkness: Two Remain, Abduction from the Seraglio*) The Atlanta Master Chorale (Music of the Civil War) and Theatrical Outfit (*Big River Suzi Winner, Young Man From Atlanta Suzi Nominee, Red Suzi Nominee, Our Town and Boy*).

He has performed his solo dramatization, *C.S. Lewis On Stage*, across North America including residencies at Harvard, Yale, Cambridge and Oxford Universities. At Theatrical Outfit, he has directed Horton Foote’s *Dividing the Estate* (ArtsATL “Best Production of the 2013-2014 Season), *Godspell* (Suzi Nominee), *Keeping Watch* (Creative Loafing “Best Production of 2005-2006 Season) and *Memphis* (Suzi Nominee). He is celebrated nationally for creating, starring in, and co-authoring with Russell Treyz and the late Harry Chapin the off-Broadway musical hit, *Cotton Patch Gospel*.

He has received The Governor’s Award in the Humanities; the Georgia Arts and Entertainment Legacy Award, Two Dramalogue Awards for Outstanding Contribution to the Theater and two Mayoral proclamations for his service to the city of Atlanta. The *Atlanta Creative Loafing* describes Tom Key as: “An actor with such energy that even standing still, he seems to quiver like a divining rod.”

A Reading from the Gospel of Luke

Luke 24:13 – 35 [New American Bible version]

Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” And he replied to them, “What sort of things?” They said to him, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place.

Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer* these things and enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.” So, he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”

So, they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two

recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Gospel of the Lord

Reflection Prompts

- The two disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread. Have you experienced the Risen Lord in a shared meal?
- Their hearts burned while the Unknown man broke open the Scriptures for them as they walked along. Have you felt “fired up and ready to go” after hearing or reading a Scripture passage that seemed to be calling you? Have you been able to respond?
- Does the setting of the Cotton Patch version of this story in 20th Century Georgia give you new insights about this story?