

Holy heartburn: Acts 2:14a; 36-41; 1 Peter 1: 17-23; Luke 24: 13-35

Again and again in scripture, pounding hearts become burning hearts.

by [Susan Andrews](#) in the [April 7, 1999](#) issue

The texts for the third Sunday of Easter are not for the fainthearted. They are about pounding hearts, wounded hearts and burning hearts. And they invite us to encounter the living Christ in the heart of who we are. Kathleen Norris and others remind us that "to believe" is not a matter of the mind, but a matter of the heart. For what we "believe" is what we "give our heart to."

When we meet the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is evening, and the spectacular glow of the day has begun to fade. Resurrection, at this point, is nothing more than a rumor, a curiosity, an idle tale. And yet when the disciples meet a stranger on the road, it is clear that the possibility of resurrection has intrigued them. They have been talking about it for hours, rehearsing the possibilities, arguing about the details, sparring with one another about the theological nuances of an empty tomb. Buried beneath their verbal skirmish, there seems to be a deep yearning and a holy hunger. Intimately intertwined with their skepticism is their hope--and their need for God to be alive and present. But the baggage of their doubt impedes the fervor of their faith. And so they fail to recognize Jesus.

On Sunday morning in contemporary America, modern disciples come straggling through the church door weighed down by cynicism, stress, pretense, power. They are sophisticated lawyers and skeptical scientists and shell-shocked journalists--skilled practitioners in the seductions of the world, but nervous novices in the realm of the Spirit. They, like the first disciples, yearn for the living presence of God. But they are too preoccupied, too suspicious, too busy to actually recognize God. In their objective world of fact and truth and matter and money, the church's world of mystery and meaning and risk and relationship seems silly. And so they are eager to discuss and debate the idea of God, but unprepared to experience or recognize the presence of God. They do not yet realize that it will only be through pounding hearts and burning hearts that they will come to believe--that they will come to recognize

Jesus.

Michael was a bright and engaging Jew, married to a church member, and a faithful participant in our Bible study classes. There was rarely a question he could not answer or a theological idea that he could not explain. His God lived vibrantly but tensely in his mind. When Michael and Carol became the parents of a baby girl, they had to decide whether to baptize her. After much soul-searching, Michael agreed that Leigh Ann would be baptized, and stood with his wife as she made the promises for their child.

Michael's hunger for scripture continued. In fact, his chewing upon the word became almost frenetic. I was not surprised when he finally came to see me. He was ready to be baptized. He was ready to follow the rabbi named Jesus. He was ready to believe. Why? Because in his intimate dance with scripture, in his intense study of the Gospels illumined by the Torah, Michael's heart had begun to burn within him--and he had recognized the living God in the face of the risen Christ. In powerful ways, the Jesus described in the Bible had begun to get up off the pages and walk out into the world with him. Jesus had become Michael's traveling companion on the journey of his daily life.

The stranger on the road to Emmaus took the skepticism and the curiosity of the disciples and wove them into the fabric of scripture. The intersection of the "tradition" with the immediacy of his own flesh lit a fire in the hearts of those who traveled with him. Finally, it was in the intimacy of breaking bread that the eyes of the disciples were opened and they recognized the stranger. They recognized the presence of the resurrected God in their midst.

Such heartfelt faith is echoed in words from Acts. When Peter describes the agony and cruelty of Christ's death to the Pentecost crowd, the listeners are "cut to the heart." And in the crucible of shared suffering and guilt, they are reborn. They become believers. They become those who give their heart to the holy--and the exuberance of the church is unleashed. Later, in the Epistle lesson, we learn that in the extended church of the Greek world, the tradition of the resurrected Lord continues to live. In joy and obedience the people "love one another deeply from the heart." Again and again in scripture, pounding hearts become burning hearts. And burning hearts become loving hearts. And so the heart of God continues to beat.

As a young man, Mahatma Gandhi studied in London. After learning about Christianity, and after reading the Sermon on the Mount, he decided that Christianity was the most complete religion in the world. It was only later, when he lived with a Christian family in East India, that he changed his mind. In that household he discovered that the word rarely became flesh--that the teaching of Jesus rarely became the reality of Jesus.

How "fleshy" is Jesus in our congregations? How persuasive is our teaching? How passionate is our preaching? How much do our hearts burn within us when the scriptures are opened to us? And how often do we recognize the stranger as the living Christ in our midst? These are the questions that emerge on the road to Emmaus. And the answers to these questions suggest both the promise and the power of Easter.