

Discernment on the Way to Emmaus: Resurrection Imagination and Practices in Luke 24:13-35

Stanley P. Saunders

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In the account of Jesus' appearance to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, the evangelist Luke presents us with a story that encapsulates some of the key tensions of the Christian tradition. Here we encounter Jesus crucified and raised, stranger and friend, human and divine. Perhaps the most disturbing element of the story, however, is the image of Jesus visible and then, suddenly, invisible. With this motif Luke takes us to the heart of the disciples' quest to discern the reality of the resurrection. Two thousand years of reflection about the resurrection has left us still searching for hard facts, for something we can prove on the world's terms. The Messiah has proved remarkably resilient and slippery through all of our attempts to secure his image, to catch him and contain him for even a moment. He remains ever just beyond the place where we can hold him in our gaze and grasp his image.

In the story of what transpired on the Emmaus road Luke weaves together these glimpses of the crucified and resurrected, visible and invisible Messiah with images of the worshipping community. The story has all the components of a good worship service: gathering, scripture reading, storytelling and proclamation, prayer, and finally Eucharist—all leading out into witness and mission. By weaving these elements together, Luke reminds us that the worshipping community has always been the place where disciples practice the disciplines of discernment and witness. Worship is the social space, in other words, where the church gathers to watch for and describe the presence of the resurrected Lord in its midst. And Easter in particular is the season when we wash the dirt of the world from our collective corrective lenses, when the light of the resurrection shines into the darkened corners of our imaginations so that the glory of the Lord can be seen once again. Easter, in other words, is about seeing clearly.

The witness of both the evangelists and the apostle Paul is that the task of seeing clearly is an exceedingly difficult undertaking, one that requires constant practice. It also requires the cultivation of a peculiar form of imagination, which is the word we use to describe "how we see." Somewhere on the way to our modern, scientific worldview, imagination got a bad rap. It became the realm of fiction, especially of fantastic images and ideas divorced from the realities of everyday life. We now often think of imagination as something that children possess in abundance, and therefore as something that must be subdued in order to achieve "realistic," practical, and "down to earth" engagement with life. But this usually means coming to terms with the world's way of looking at things. Discipleship entails nurturing another way of seeing.

Our wariness with regard to the imagination can be deadly when it comes to the walk of Christian faith, which is guided by imagination rooted in the stories of Jesus and his disciples, especially in the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Christians and churches that fail to nurture a "resurrection imagination" inevitably become blinded by the "realities" of this world, unable to discern God's life-giving presence in our life together and unable to sustain a faithful Christian witness. Easter is the season when we in the church have our vision tested. When we go looking for

the risen Messiah, will he be visible, or will the images and imaginations of this world choke out his presence?

Over a century ago a British cleric, classicist, educator, and Shakespearean scholar named Edwin Abbott published a small volume exploring the world of perception and dimension. Abbott's work has remained popular among physicists and others in the scientific community because it serves as a wonderful introduction to the world of multiple dimensions. It deserves to be read by Christians, as well, for its capacity to illustrate what the struggle to establish and nurture a resurrection imagination is like. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*¹ is set in a world of two dimensions where everyone is a geometric object: women, who occupy the lowest rung in the social order, are mere lines; polygons make up the nobility; and circles are the High Priests. Flatland is an orderly, hierarchical, and relatively unchanging world. The chief character in the story is Mr. Square, a conservative member of the establishment, who unquestioningly accepts the sacred belief that reality consists of only two dimensions.

The story involves the events that transpire after Mr. Square is visited one day by the mysterious Lord Sphere. Although Lord Sphere is a three-dimensional entity, Mr. Square perceives him only as a circle that is able to change sizes, apparently by magic. When rational explanation fails to convince Mr. Square that a third dimension exists, Lord Sphere peels Mr. Square off of his two-dimensional world and leaves him to float about in Spaceland (the world of three dimensions), like a sheet of paper in the wind. Because Mr. Square is still able to perceive reality only in two dimensions, his perspective is limited to cross sections of the three-dimensional objects that occupy Spaceland. These three-dimensional objects appear to him as a fantastic and bewildering array of images, constantly changing shape, appearing and disappearing in thin air.

Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions became an instant and enduring success in part because of its biting critique of the bigotry and rigidity of Victorian society (especially its treatment of women) and in part because of its capacity to open its readers' minds to the realms of possibility beyond the experienced senses—even the senses of those of us who experience reality in three dimensions (with time usually considered the fourth). Abbott's work has reminded subsequent generations of readers that our assumptions about reality and our consequent organization of social relations within the reality we perceive may be severely limited. (Even our physical senses are limited: speculation among contemporary scientists includes not merely three, but ten dimensions.)² Put in other words, our broken world shapes our capacities of discernment; the world tells us how to perceive reality and how to locate ourselves socially within what we consider reality. In this way our imaginations have become darkened, as Paul puts it (Romans 1:21) and our capacities to discern God's presence in our midst are dulled and diminished.

Easter is the time when Christians should ask hard questions about our dominating perceptions of reality. Does life have to be lived the way we've been taught in the world around us? Must we accept the ways the world constrains us to order our relationships with one another? Are poverty and violence necessarily parts of our human experience? Will there always be strangers and enemies at our doorstep? While much popular theology suggests that we should look for real changes only in "the world to come," the New Testament persistently affirms that God's reality, the realm

where Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, has already begun to bump into, destabilize and threaten, and finally tear down the most cherished notions of reality our broken world can offer.

Nowhere is this notion of changed reality more clearly and forcefully expressed than in the New Testament's depiction of the resurrected crucified Messiah. The resurrection destroys our notion that death is the final boundary of human experience. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth challenges our notion that the powers of this world are the final arbiters of reality. The resurrection of Jesus Christ undermines our notion of a God who is, at best, absent from this world (the premise of secularism) or, at worst, hostile to humankind.

The resurrection is the ultimate vindication of Jesus' way in the world. It is an affirmation that his perception of reality, his organization of relationships, and his way of dealing with the powers of this world is the only true way. The early Christians' proclamation of the Lordship of the resurrected Jesus meant that his story now described for them what it meant to be human. More than even this, the gospel proclamation means that the resurrected Lord now rules both heaven and earth. He is present in power—a power manifested most clearly in the cross—and present to reclaim all of creation for God's glory (cf. e.g., Matthew 28:18-20, Colossians 1:15-20).

But while the New Testament consistently affirms the reality of the resurrection and the continuing presence of Jesus and the Spirit in human experience, the New Testament authors also make it clear that not everyone is able to discern the presence of the resurrected one, save as an anomalous and fleeting apparition. Like Mr. Square observing the fantastic objects in Spaceland, the disciple of Christ catches glimpses here and there of the resurrected Lord, but always just a portion, a *cross* section, as it were. Moving beyond these experiences—gaining and sustaining sight—requires that disciples nurture a peculiar set of practices and ways of seeing. The disciple must learn to “watch,” to “discern,” to “see” in such a way that, over time, more and more of the image can be realized. In other words, discerning the presence of the risen Lord requires the nurturing of a peculiar imagination—one shaped by the gospel stories and the practices of discipleship.

The story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 is one of the richest examples of a large number of gospel stories that are designed to help disciples know where and how to look in order to discern Jesus' presence. The account not only sets forth the essential content of a “resurrection imagination,” but also points us toward the settings and practices wherein this peculiar imagination can take shape.

Much like Mr. Square in the story of Flatland, the two disciples on their way to Emmaus are apparently good citizens of their world, hoping only that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. They have witnessed his crucifixion at the hands of the chief priests and rulers, those whom they understand to hold the ultimate political, economic, and religious power in their world. They understand, according to the world's logic, that Jesus' death means the apparent end of his messianic claims, as well as their own hopes. Thus, they are downcast and standing still when Jesus first encounters them on the road to Emmaus. Passivity and despair are symptoms of imagination and practices held in thrall to the powers of this world. But at least they are on the road, where Jesus always seems to lead his disciples.

He comes among them as a stranger, and uninformed as well. They must tell him all that has taken place in Jerusalem in the last few days. The heart of their account is located in the world's way of imagining things. The bedrock facts of the story are the death of Jesus and the consequent crushing of the disciples' hope. The two disciples can only wonder at the account of the women who were with Jesus at the tomb. The women couldn't find the body, but told of seeing angels who announced that He was alive. Others from the company of disciples went to the tomb, as well, but they did not see him either. This account has all the makings of a scientific breakthrough, a paradigm shift about to happen. All the facts are in, but only some of them count. Those that do not seem to fit the dominant paradigm are cause for wonder and disturbance, but not yet for a new imagination.

Jesus supplies the next required piece. He chides them for being "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (24:25). "Slow of heart" is another way of describing the stupor induced by the world. Jesus addresses this stupor by juxtaposing two things that seem not to belong together in their (and our) imagination. These seemingly paradoxical juxtapositions are one of Jesus' favorite ways of unsettling slow, blind, and faithless disciples. He reminds them that suffering and glory are coextensive dimensions of the Messiah's way in the world. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (24:26) These "bifocal" elements make up the lens through which disciples must learn to look at reality. Moses and the prophets, all of the writings concerning himself, comprise the frame that focuses the disciples' perspective. But still there is no vision. Reports of missing bodies are not enough. Stories of visions are not enough. The scriptures are not enough. Not even a good sermon, not even one preached by Jesus himself, will penetrate the fog that surrounds these disciples. Discernment of the resurrected Lord requires all these, to be sure. They provide the fragmentary glimpses of what seems to be a fantastic vision. The *cross* sections of discernment are beginning to pile up, but all these are not yet enough.

Luke locates the turning point of Christian discernment neither in intellectual pursuit nor in words alone, but in the practices of table fellowship with strangers and enemies. As they draw near to the village, Jesus appears to be going on. But they "constrain" him (24:29). The word is surprisingly strong, suggesting coercion, even force. They want him to stay with them. The same Messiah who was born in the stable because there was no place in the inn is now compelled by would-be disciples to remain the night. On their part, this is an act of ideal discipleship. Although his words are already burning in their hearts, he remains a stranger to them. But Jesus has taught and shown them by example that following in his way consists of relentless, surprising acts of hospitality. They have been well-trained, and now, in this most crucial moment, their training pays off. They invite the stranger in.

At table, however, there is another surprise. The stranger becomes the host. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. These are eucharistic actions. The disciples have seen Jesus do this before. And now, finally, with these actions their eyes are opened. The text conveys a sense that their recognition is clear, strong, and certain. But as suddenly as Jesus is recognized, he vanishes. We should not seek to resolve the tension this disappearance engenders within us, for it is in these tensions between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, that the path of discipleship is necessarily located. To dissolve this tension, whether by moving to embrace and

control his presence or by resigning ourselves to his absence, is to split open the paradoxical heart of the gospel, the good news of God become human. Resurrection imagination happens in the places where suffering and glory, humanity and divinity, spirit and flesh, presence and absence are embraced.

Those of us in the church are quick to claim the eucharistic setting of discernment toward which this story points, and rightly so. But in our perception of reality, the Eucharist has become a practice that is too often limited to the private confines of the church, where it happens out of sight of the world. We need to remind ourselves that this meal, like the meals Jesus celebrated with the lost ones, the little ones, and the forgotten ones of this world, and like the meals shared by the communities of disciples in early Christianity, was a real meal, not merely a ritualistic symbol. The table of discernment toward which this story points is not the exclusive, homogenous table of most of our churches, but a table with real food shared among strangers.

This risky table is the location not only of discernment but of mission. This story suggests, in fact, that mission and discernment of the risen Lord are coextensive. Marianne Sawicki has clearly articulated one aspect of the missional dimensions of these verses in her book *Seeing the Lord*: “Luke says that words do not lead anyone to recognize the Risen Lord. In fact, for Luke the ability to recognize a hungry person is the precondition for recognizing the Risen Lord.”³ She situates the Emmaus story within Luke’s numerous accounts of hunger and eating in the ministry of Jesus, and concludes that “for Luke . . . recognition of the Risen Lord is possible only within a community that knows both how to be hungry and how to feed the hungry. Stories about empty tombs simply have no efficacy, except within such a community.”⁴ Discernment of the resurrected Lord does not happen in the solitude of the individual believer’s heart, but in the mess and noise of table fellowship with strangers and outcasts.

Luke closes this episode by recording yet another practice of resurrection discernment and imagination. The two disciples rise up from the table that same hour and return to Jerusalem—a place of danger, where the world’s powers have crucified Jesus—where they add their story of meeting the resurrected Lord to those already being collected by the rest of the disciples. One of the crucial, yet underdeveloped functions of the worshipping community is to name and gather together the stories of ongoing encounters with the resurrected one. Given the fact that we so infrequently offer contemporary disciples the opportunity and social space to tell their own stories of resurrection encounters, we should not be surprised that resurrection imagination and discernment are so impoverished in many of our churches today. Nurturing a peculiar, Christian vision requires vigilance in naming what we have seen, lest the distorting vision offered by the world suppress our imagination.

Preachers should include the creation of such social spaces among our most important tasks. Admittedly, this may run contrary to our tendency to use the pulpit to express our own voice to the exclusion of others’. But good preaching is about listening well, granting others their voices, and naming not only what we have seen, but what the whole body sees. It should, as well, be an occasion for “funding the imagination,” to use Walter Brueggemann’s phrase, that is, for opening eyes into wholly (and holy) new ways of seeing. Just as Jesus keeps pushing at the boundaries of his disciples’ imagination, so also preachers of the gospel should aim to “subvert” their audiences’ complacent acceptance of the “way things are.”⁵

Make no mistake about it, entering into the realm of resurrection imagination will entail great personal risk, and the stakes couldn't be higher. When Mr. Square returns from his visit to Spaceland and tries to tell his fellow Flatlanders about the marvels of the third dimension, the High Priests dismiss him as a seditious idiot. His tales of fantastic shapes and images in the third dimension threaten both their tidy belief systems and their organization of the social order. For them, sacredness is located in the meticulous ordering and preservation of a world they can control. At the end of the book, Mr. Square is condemned to spend the rest of his life in solitary confinement, where he cannot threaten their controlled world.

It is not so different for the church. The reordering of power and perception that happens in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ has always been a threat to the established powers of this world. For those in the church who are more comfortable with the way things are and with ways of seeing and knowing that are rooted in this world, the message of the resurrection will always be an uncomfortable embarrassment, at best. Churches in thrall to the powers of this world will always want to push the resurrection into the next life, into another time or place where it does not encroach upon our tidy, idolatrous ways of perceiving and organizing life.

Luke the evangelist intends the story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus to serve as a challenge precisely to those whose imaginations have become dull and worldly, and whose capacity—or willingness—to discern God's presence has diminished. Luke, like most of the New Testament authors, is not content to let the tomb remain pleasantly empty. Here, rather, we meet a risen Lord who chides us, who challenges us, who makes our hearts burn within us as he accompanies us on the way. But only when we nurture eyes that see and ears that hear.

Notes

I want to express my thanks to my colleague, Chuck Campbell, who read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. His friendship, advice, and the mutual stretching of imaginations we have discovered in our work together is greatly appreciated.

¹ Edwin Abbott Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (New York: Dover Publications, 1953; reprint Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.)

² Michio Kaku, *Hyperspace: A Scientific Odyssey through Parallel Universes, Time Warps, and the 10th Dimension* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), provides a wonderful, accessible introduction to these matters

³ Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 89.

⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 90f.