

“What Remains Unexplainable”
Sermon from Luke 24:13-32 & the Sixth Dwelling Places of
Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle*
Given Sunday, August 16, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Two of the disciples were making their way to a village called Emmaus - which was about seven miles from Jerusalem - discussing all that had happened as they went. While they were discussing these things Jesus approached and began to walk along with them, though they were kept from recognizing Jesus, who asked them, “What are you two discussing as you go your way?”

They stopped and looked sad. One of them, Cleopas by name, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened the last two days?”

Jesus said to them, “What things?”

They said, “About Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet powerful in word and in deed, in the eyes of God and all the people - how our chief priests and leaders condemned him to death and delivered him up to be crucified. We were hoping he was the one who would set Israel free. Besides all this, today - the third day since these things happened - some women in our group have just brought us some astonishing news. They were at the tomb before dawn and didn’t find the body; they returned and informed us they had seen a vision of angels, who told them Jesus was alive.”

... Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to the Messiah. By now they were near the village they were going to, and Jesus appeared to be going further. But they said eagerly, “Stay with us. It is nearly evening - the day is practically over.”

So the Savior went in and stayed with them. After sitting down with them to eat, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, who immediately vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Weren’t our

hearts burning inside us as this one talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?"

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When's the last time you felt your heart burning? When you knew that you knew something – you had some deep intuition, some persistent hunch? What did you do about it?

If you've been with us all summer, you can probably say this part yourself now, but if you're just joining us, here's where we are: since we're basically encouraged to stay home as much as we can, we're spending this season, Sunday mornings, at least, following Teresa of Avila around the house. It's like a really local spiritual journey, of sorts – Teresa is a leader, a teacher and a reformer in a Carmelite convent in Spain, in the 16th century, and one Sunday after Easter she has a vision: it's a vision of the soul, and it's revealed to her all at once, and over the next years she eventually gets it written down, and that writing is the text we're working from this summer, *The Interior Castle*. In it, she says this is what she saw: a house – a castle, really – carved from a single diamond. It's intricate, and beautiful, and each of the seven rooms in it is a different place the soul dwells on its spiritual journey. At the very center of it all is the seventh dwelling place, the seventh room, and that's where God dwells. But we can't get there without going through the other

rooms, without spending time in each, and today we're in the sixth dwelling place. Still.

We're getting close to the center. And getting close is complicated. The Sixth Dwelling Place is the one Teresa spends the most time in, by far, because there's so much here.

When we first entered there were lots of trials, lots of struggles to deal with, and the encouragement to just keep going.

Last week we heard Teresa's call to spend some time here thinking about Jesus' humanity. To consider his suffering, to sit with it in our minds and see where else that reflection might lead us.

This week, she invites us to think about divinity. About the mysteries of God. Teresa says when we're this close, there will be times when we can feel a holy presence, beside us, a sacred comfort, near – we can't see it, she says, not with the eyes of the body and not with the eyes of the soul, either – but we can sense, and know, that it's real. We just might not be able to explain it.

Here, she echoes the Psalmist, she echoes Job, she echoes the women at the empty tomb: she speaks from the very center of her

tradition to say that for all that can be said about God, there is so much more than can't. For all that can be known about God – from the ways the whole earth, every leaf on a tree, every bud on a flower, every wave of the ocean reveals God to us – there is still so much that can never be known.

And here, at the end of her discussion of the sixth dwelling places, she tells us that however united a soul might strive to be with God, however many visions God grants, however connected that person feels to God in prayer or meditation – at the center of it all is mystery. Long before her, St. Augustine would say, “If we have understood, then what we have understood is not God.”

Even as she's writing, she keeps interrupting herself to make that clear... Describing a sense of union she felt, she writes, “I would like to be able to explain more about this, but it is unexplainable.” “My words fall short,” she writes a little later on, “because the experience of God is unexplainable.” This whole chapter is peppered with statements like that – Teresa begging for forgiveness, or simply stating the facts – that she's in pretty far now, and words are failing her.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever experienced something that you couldn't then communicate?

Tanya Luhmann, a professor of anthropology at Stanford, was on a train one day, headed to interview a group of people who practice magic. She was reading a book by a member of that group, one the group regards as really skilled and powerful, and as she read his words, she started to imagine what it would feel like for that man to be on the train. And as she imagined, she says, she began to feel power in her veins – to really feel it, not imagine it. She grew hot. She became completely alert, she said, more awake than she usually is. She says, “I felt so alive. It seemed that power coursed through me like water through a chute. I wanted to sing. And then wisps of smoke came out of my backpack, where I had tossed my bicycle lights. I opened it to find one of them was melting.”

This was years ago. Even today, she can describe the experience, but she can't explain it. Some mystery remains.

Teresa tells us that someone she knows quite well had a remarkable vision – she often uses that “uh, asking for a friend” technique in her writing – but she tells us that for this person she knows, that kind of vision was just as certain as anything that her senses might have

perceived. They didn't, here – this “friend” didn't see or hear or touch Jesus, but knew, still, that it was him beside her. She calls it an “intellectual vision.” And maybe because it's not dependent on sensory perceptions, it endures – she says this sense of presence can go on for days.

And maybe most of us don't experience this sort of thing. Or we do, we sense a presence near, or some power, but since we can't really name it, can't explain it, we do... sort of what Teresa does, and maybe tell a story, but separate ourselves from it. I wonder what would change for us if we were encouraged to name the everyday strangeness and grace of our lives as holy.

The spiritual teacher Frederick Buechner writes that when we name the Trinity – when we say that God is somehow three-in-one – Creator, Son, Spirit, or however we call it, he says by speaking of that connection, “we mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.”

And then he writes, “If the idea of God as both Three and One seems far-fetched and obfuscating, look in the mirror someday. There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (this can be likened to the Creator). There is (b)

the visible face which in some measure reflects that inner life (this can be likened to the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have in order to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know about it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (this can be likened to the Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and indivisibly the one and only You.”

The mystery of God is mirrored in the mystery of our own being. The mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.

I wonder, in our scripture today, after the ones who had been walking with the stranger invited him in, let him break bread for them, and then recognized him as Jesus – I wonder, what do they know, after he leaves? One mystery has been solved – he’s not a stranger anymore, but their friend, and more than that: he is their defeated hope, resurrected; he is their call back to the work they’d nearly abandoned.

But the answering of one question just gives way to so many more. How is their friend alive? Why did he join them on the road? How did they not recognize him? What does this mean for their

movement, for their community, what does it mean for just really basic questions of life and death? How will they tell this story?

I mean, it basically goes like this: We were walking, and we didn't understand. And then, all of a sudden, we did – just for a moment. And now we don't understand in a whole new way.

I wonder if this is what they're left with: We are not where we were when we began. We had so many questions then. Some of those have been answered. But we have even more questions now. What we know is to pay attention to when our hearts burn inside of us. What we know is not to ignore that.

What we know is that our burning hearts are themselves a kind of knowing, a kind of intuition, that lead us to more truth. We cannot explain it. But we know it unfolds us into closer communion, so we will honor it.

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Friends, while you listen to the music, I'd invite you to pull out your pen and paper and consider: What about God is mysterious to you? How, if at all, do you find yourself invited into that mystery? How, if at all, do you respond? Take some time now to respond, in words or lists or images or however, to those questions.