
Humpty Dumpty and Jesus

Luke 24:13-35

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 30, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

Poor Humpty Dumpty. I've always wondered if someone pushed Humpty Dumpty off that wall. Can you imagine the headline news? "The Fall of the Great Humpty Dumpty." "Humpty Dumpty, Cracked Forever." This event has grabbed human attention for years. Humpty Dumpty has been used to demonstrate the second law of thermodynamics, particularly in a process known as entropy. TurboTax even ran a Humpty Dumpty-inspired television commercial during Super Bowl LI. The ad showed Humpty Dumpty in a hospital using a smartphone app to ask whether he could claim a tax deduction for medical expenses.

Since the 18th century onward, in music, literature, and other art forms, the story of Humpty Dumpty has captured the human imagination. He has functioned as an existential trope for human life. Humpty Dumpty's story finds resonance in ours. We're all Humpty Dumpty at some point. It's like that song, first published in 1925, says,

*I'm sitting on top of the world
Just rolling along, Just rolling along
....Just singing a song....
Just like Humpty Dumpty, I'm going to fall....*

And when we fall like a precious piece of china from a family heirloom, we often break into pieces too.

The fall of Adam and Eve was the beginning of all falls. That fall started a revolution of falling into brokenness. We may find ourselves broken due to unhealthy relationships or a country's civil war or chronic physical pain. And we'll do everything in our power to avoid becoming broken because shattered or cracked glass is not usually a hot-selling item on eBay. Who wants to exist with cracks? No one in their right mind chooses to be broken. We'll try to drink it away, engulf prescriptions to remove it, or begin other habits that ultimately hurt, in order to attempt to put our lives back together again. But all the king's horses and all the king's men, and all the alcohol, and all the drugs, can't do it, for Humpty, celebrities, or us.

We participate in the liturgy and worship as a balm for our brokenness but even here, you can't escape brokenness. We confess our sin—that is an acknowledgement of our spiritual brokenness. We say prayers of the people—that confirms a broken, splintered world. The pattern of the walk to Emmaus has been viewed as providing the four-fold ordo, the pattern or shape of the liturgy. There is a *gathering* as the two disciples come together talking with each other and eventually with Jesus.

Then there is the *Word* as they discuss the scriptures and Jesus “beginning with Moses and all the prophets... interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” Then there is the *meal* where they sit at a table and eat together. Finally, the disciples *scatter* as they return to Jerusalem. So we have the gathering, the word, the meal, and the scattering into the world as witnesses. This is the movement of a typical Christian liturgy, even our own. And within the liturgy, brokenness pervades.

What is not noticed or discussed much is how even the liturgy itself is broken. This doesn't mean that it doesn't work. A broken liturgy is like a 'broken myth' (Paul Tillich) in words and ritual practices, meaning “the old is maintained; yet, by means of juxtaposition and metaphor, the old is made to speak the new” (G Lathrop). It means what it did in the past and it doesn't mean what it did in the past because it is a new day and situation; the old is broken. You can see this idea of brokenness in the actual name 'Jesus Christ' who is the foundation of any liturgy. Of course, in this name is kingship and anointing and messianic hope, “Yet” according to liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop, “in juxtaposing that tradition [speaking of 'the Christ'] to a crucified first-century man ['Jesus'], the title Christ is given to one who is no king nor any messiah of ordinary expectation. The whole tradition is broken. We are reigned over by one who serves us, saved by one who dies, universally embraced by one made to be utterly little.” The tradition, the idea, our expectations, theologies and philosophies, are broken. What we expect of a Christ is not what we get, breaking our understanding of God. Sometimes that may be the hardest fall of all off of our walls of theological certitude and that fall breaks us open to the newness found in Christ.

The beauty of revelation, the glory of God, may actually be experienced in our brokenness. The great fall may be an act of extraordinary and unusual grace. There is beauty, there is truth, there is goodness, revealed in broken people and places, including Jesus Christ, for Christ had his very body broken on a cross. The crux of brokenness is the cross. A crown of thorns crushed on his head. Pierced in his side. Nailed in his hands. Rose with visible scars as not to forget his brokenness. So when we enter the liturgy or when we begin the Christian walk with him, we are entering brokenness on different levels. Symbols of brokenness are everywhere, even hovering high above us, covering us to remind us, that broken people are Christ's people! Crucified people are the people of Christ. He is the broker of brokenness. His mission, as laid out in his first sermon, is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free. Jesus never flees from suffering and those suffering. He is discovered among broken people and places because he's a broken God and his scars prove this.

Even more so, when Jesus sits at a table, takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples, “then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” Once he broke it and gave it and they received it, then they recognize Jesus because you have to receive the broken pieces willingly in order to see clearly. If you don't accept the reality of brokenness, you won't see Jesus among you because it's in the brokenness where we see Christ. “He had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” In the breaking, Christ is present. If there is no brokenness, there will not be the holiness of the presence of Jesus. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “Where life is not rent, the God of Israel is not inclined to be present.” At one point, theologian and author Marva Dawn said she had arthritic hands, a crippled leg, a blind eye, a deaf ear, kidneys functioning around 17%, dead intestinal and stomach nerves, pain leftover from cancer and jaw surgeries, the imminent possibility of losing vision in her remaining eye, sores that would eventually necessitate amputation of her foot yet she faithfully taught that God tabernacles in weakness, in her brokenness, even her broken body.

What is your proximity to pain and brokenness these days? Your answer says something about your closeness to Christ. It wasn't when the disciples were talking and discussing about what happened with the empty tomb that Jesus was seen; but it was when action was taken and the bread was broken. In the breaking, he was known and recognized.

The neo-gothic architecture of this cathedral can make you forget pain and the suffering of the world. It's so beautiful and transcendent. It lifts us above the world. It represents glory and power and even domination. We can forget that its cruciform shape represents divine and human suffering since the cross was a tool of torture and execution for criminals. In this privileged space and campus, we can forget the Humpty Dumptys who will never be put back together again. They may have a great summer internship in a corporation consulting social entrepreneurs or be a Rhodes Scholar but they can still be broken. Yet this is the opportunity then to remember that brokenness can be the site of sacred presence. He was made known in the breaking.

Daily, I remind myself that Jesus's people are broken people. If you enter my 'Harry Potter' chapel office, you'll see a communion chalice and plate from Tabgha, an area on the Sea of Galilee, on the left side of my desk. Next to that, is a can of Arizona iced tea and skittles, which is what Trayvon Martin had in his hands when he was shot and killed in Sanford, FL, in 2012. I have them side by side on my desk as a memorial for all of the broken people in the world. It's as if they are an outward sign of an invisible message—"Don't forget." Do this, do your job, in remembrance. Don't forget that Christ's brokenness is our brokenness. Having those elements on my desk keeps me grounded and reminds me not only of Christ and my faith, but of where I come from, because Trayvon was growing up in Miami Gardens, FL, where I grew up and where my parents still live. Every time I walk into my office and see the chalice, plate, iced tea and skittles, I hear the faint call—Don't forget Jesus. Don't forget Trayvon. Don't forget Humpty Dumpty. Don't forget those who are broken.

Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread. He is known to us in brokenness, especially broken bodies in hospitals, on battlefields, laying in the street or sitting in a pew. You will soon hear, "This is my body broken for you" when you receive a broken piece of bread. In the breaking, I hope your eyes will be opened to recognize Christ in our midst.

Go to broken people and broken places. If you don't, you'll miss the risen Christ among you.

Many times, we miss Christ on death row even though Jesus said, "I was in prison and you didn't visit me." Recently, Arkansas executed an inmate for the first time in nearly a dozen years. Ledell Lee's execution was the first in the state since 2005. He was pronounced dead at 11:56 p.m., four minutes before his death warrant was due to expire. Do you know what his last meal request was? Communion. This is my body broken for you. "I was in prison and you didn't visit me." He is known in the breaking, the breaking of the bread and the breaking of our lives.