

A couple months ago I sat down over lunch with an old-friend of mine, we'll call him Rob. Rob and I first met about 20 years ago when I attended a church he pastored. At the time, Rob had been at the church only 6 months, which was about 3 months longer than I had been there. It was summertime, I was done with college and had applied to a few different seminaries but was still waiting to find out where I might be going next. To be totally honest, I was at Rob's church that summer because they had a softball team, and I thought it would be fun to play softball, and they had a girl I was particularly interested in getting to know at that church. That I was applying to some seminaries Rob himself would probably never have been caught dead at, that when it came to the Bible and how to make sense of it, Rob and I generally didn't agree on much—I've never really been sold on the Virgin Birth story—and that Rob and I probably never voted the same way in an election, didn't seem to matter that summer. Rob, God bless him, said it would be fun to play softball together and that he'd introduce me to the girl. I remember we didn't win at softball much that summer, but I did get the girl.

Anyway, when Rob and I got together for lunch this past June, it was the first time in about 10 years since we'd seen each other. Rob had just moved back to New England from Atlanta where he'd been working at an absolutely gigantic church. He was now going to be part of a church plant. Along with only 10 or 11 other people, Rob was going to help start a new church, and hot on his mind were questions of necessity, of what it would take, and of what is and is not negotiable in being a church.

I wonder how many of us have thought about such questions lately, if ever. Unlike Rob, we didn't arrive here yesterday. As a church, we've had a sign here at the corner of Angell and Diamond Hill Road for well over 100 years. We've been doing church for a long while. I wonder when the last time was that any of us stopped to ask ourselves what is and is not necessary to our operation.

Bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert tells the story about a great Indian saint who was always surrounded in his Ashram by loyal devotees. For hours a day, the saint and his followers would meditate on God. The only problem was that the saint had a young cat, an

annoying creature, who used to walk through the temple meowing and purring and bothering everyone during meditation. So the saint, in all his practical wisdom, commanded that the cat be tied to a pole outside for a few hours a day, only during meditation, so as to not disturb anyone. This became a habit—tying the cat to a pole and then meditating on God—but as years passed, the habit hardened into religious ritual. Nobody could meditate unless the cat was tied to the pole first. Then one day the cat died. The saint’s followers were panic-stricken. It was a major religious crisis—how could they meditate now, without a cat to tie to a pole? How would they reach God? In their minds, the cat had become the means.

Sometimes we can be in a place for so long that we forget how we got there and what it is that we came to do in the first place. We must be very careful not to get too obsessed with the repetition of religious ritual just for its own sake, writes Gilbert. In a world like ours, where both Isis and the Christian Coalition believe they own the rights to the word *God* and how to reach God, it may be useful to remember that it is not the tying a cat to a pole that has ever brought anyone to God, but only those who seek compassion. Flexibility is just as essential for worship as is discipline.¹

When I asked my friend Rob what he thought would be essential to his new church, he answered, “Resurrection.”

“You mean having hope in all things?” I said. “Like believing nothing and no one is beyond love and repair?”

“No,” he said, “I mean believing in the resurrection of Jesus. Believing that it actually happened. That’s a deal-breaker for me. You can’t be a Christian unless you believe Jesus was raised from the dead.”

That Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised after three days has been a central tenet of the Christian faith for more than 2,000 years, so I understood what Rob was putting on the line, but I’ve always thought more of what Clarence Jordan, the founder of the Koinonia Community in Georgia, had to say when he said, “The proof of Easter is not a rolled away stone but a carried away church.” Not some rock, not some statement of faith, not some verse out of the Bible or some cat on a pole, but a people covered in compassion, kindness,

¹ *Eat, Pray, Love*, 2006; New York, NY: Penguin Books, p. 205 – 206.

and humility; not complaining against one another, but forgiving, because we know we have been forgiven; a people not afraid to speak difficult truths; who know it is better to understand than to be understood; whose hands are the work of peace; not a rolled away stone but a people carried away with joyfulness.

You remember what happened on Easter Sunday, even after Jesus had come back from the dead? The gospel writer Luke says that no one recognized him. I mean, he'd only been in the grave for 3 days! How much does 3 days in the ground change a person's looks? But this is what Luke says, that in the evening on Easter Sunday, two people were out for a walk when Jesus comes up alongside them, except they don't recognize him. And Jesus starts to talk to them. He asks them where they're coming from and where they're going, and why they look so sad.

"Are you the only person around who hasn't heard the news?" they ask him. "About Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified and buried? We had hoped he was going to be the Savior of the World but we just came from the cemetery to find that his body has been taken."

These poor souls. Their friend Jesus was taken from them in life and now he's also been taken from them in death.

Luke says that Jesus, this stranger of a man to them, tries to cheer them up by doing several things. He quotes scripture to them. Starting way back in the Old Testament with Moses and the prophets he tells them the whole story about himself. But all they have to say is, yes, we had hoped. He tries reminding them of the promise that he would rise again on the third day and that today is the third day. But still all they had to say was, we had hoped.

I think it's worth pointing out that despite all the efforts to convince the two travelers out walking the road that day that Jesus was not dead but alive and well, *Jesus himself couldn't convince them*. What to do, what to do next, when a rolled away stone isn't enough to convince us of resurrection.

Luke records that this is when Jesus starts to walk ahead of the two travelers as if he'd decided there was no hope in them ever figuring out who he really was. "*But they urged him strongly, saying, stay with us. The day is almost over. So he went in and stayed*

with them. And while they were sitting at the table, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

I don't know if you see what's going on here, but this is a story about us and about what we come together to do every week here in church. We are out traveling the road looking for meaning in a world full of confusion and heartbreak. We've heard about the stone rolled away, but that's not enough to convince us that anything is really going to change. So we get up one Sunday morning and decide to go to church. We show up here only to discover that we don't have to travel alone. Will we find what we are looking for? Will we find Jesus? Is he in the scriptures? Is he in the rituals? Is he in the stranger we don't know but who has also come to be here with us today? Is he in the breaking and sharing of bread?

Luke says that Jesus was made known to the two travelers in the breaking and sharing of bread, but before this could happen, they had to invite him in. So, I want to end by giving you an invitation. Today, our children will start back to Sunday School. They're doing a cool thing with Sunday School this year. Rather than meeting in individual classrooms, children ages 4 all the way up to 5th grade will be meeting together in the Fellowship Hall. Each week they'll hear a Bible story and then move around to various stations—arts and crafts, music, games—all designed to help them dig in deeper to God's word. We've got a fantastic group of adult leaders who have stepped up to learn with our children, but we're still looking for 4 more. Now some of us will say, "I'm not a teacher." Or, "I paid my dues years ago." Or, "I'm too old." But you don't have to be a teacher to help a child work a glue stick. And you're never too old to listen to a Bible story with a child, to hear their questions, or to clap your hands in song with them. With 4 more adults in the mix, we'll have 4 teams of 3, and that will mean every adult volunteer will get to cover about 10 Sundays this year. You probably won't break and share any bread in Sunday School, but I guarantee you'll share some goldfish crackers, and when all is said and done you will have shared yourself and isn't that what Jesus would do?

Lastly, we're trying something new this year in that on the first Sunday of each month, our children will remain in the sanctuary for the entire service so they can participate in Communion with us. Moms and Dads, we know this doesn't necessarily make it easier on you in your search for a little peace and quiet. Sure, little ones (and big ones

too) can get squirmy and restless, and someone will make the argument that they don't understand the meaning and mystery of communion anyway. But as my son Rowan said to his mother recently when the plate of bread and the trays of juice came down his pew, "Isn't there enough for me?" we know that our children are searching for meaning. They want to be included. Will they find what they are looking for in you? As you pass the bread to them, as they pass the bread to you, will we all find that sitting right next to us this whole time has been Jesus, and we never knew it? May it be so. Amen.