

Easter Faith and Empire

Recovering the Prophetic Tradition on the Emmaus Road

Ched Myers

And Abraham said to the rich man, "If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."
—Luke 16:31

In the first century *Pax Romana*, Christians had the difficult and demanding task of discerning how to cling to a radical ethos of life—symbolized preeminently by their stubborn belief in the Resurrection of Jesus—while living under the chilling shadow of an imperial culture of domination and death. Today, in the twenty-first century *Pax Americana*, U.S. Christians are faced with the same challenge: to celebrate Easter faith in the teeth of empire and its discontents.

“The words *empire* and *imperialism* enjoy no easy hospitality in the minds and hearts of most contemporary Americans,” wrote the great historian William Appleman Williams a quarter century ago in his brilliant re-reading of U.S. history.¹ Yet today, because of the ascendancy of New Right’s ideological project (whose intellectual architecture is typified by the Project for a New American Century), the word is increasingly used approvingly in regards to U.S. policy. We are indeed well down the road of imperial unilateralism, and are seeing clearly that this means a world held hostage to wars and rumors of war. The conquest and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq have had an enormous human and political cost. Meanwhile, the US has military bases on every continent, and some form of military presence in almost two third of the 189 member states in the United Nations.

Williams believed that “we have only just begun our confrontation with our imperial history, our imperial ethic, and our imperial psychology... Americans of the 20th century like empire for the same reasons their ancestors had favored it in the 18th and 19th centuries. It provides them with renewable opportunities, wealth, and other benefits and satisfactions including a psychological sense of well being and power.”²

Predictably, in the religious sphere, a brand of Christianity that fits hand in glove with imperial America is flourishing. It is a discouraging time indeed for those in our churches who are distressed by the manipulative religious rhetoric and posturing of the Bush administration.

To combat this disastrous drift, we need to turn to deeper sources of critique and hope. I believe our scriptural tradition offers such resources for our struggle to recover a non-imperial faith and to imagine a non-imperial future. But we must wrest these sacred stories back from the clutches of the Religious Right, offering a more compelling reading. This essay means to be a small contribution to this task.

¹ *Empire as a Way of Life*, NY:Oxford University Press, 1980, p. viii.

² *ibid*, 13

Chocolate-Coating Easter in Wartime

For the churches of the Northern Hemisphere, the fact that Eastertide is celebrated at the heart of Spring time has been a mixed blessing. On one hand, there is a powerful resonance between this season of surging new life in nature and the story of Christ's resurrection. On the other, the liturgical and theological meaning of Easter has often been lost amidst other, more popular rites of spring. For Christians in the United States, however, our greatest problem in this present moment of war is the omnipresent temptation to conflate Easter's story of God's power over death with the triumphalistic pretensions of omnipotence that characterize American empire.

I write on the second anniversary of the declared "end" to the latest Iraq war, called by the Bush administration Operation Iraqi Freedom, but more accurately referred to in Britain as the Fifth Anglo-Iraq War. But that war rages on, and as of this moment some ten times more U.S. servicemen and -women have lost their lives during the ensuing occupation than during the official hostilities. And though it is official Bush administration policy *not* to tally the Iraqi soldiers, insurgents and civilians killed in this latest conflict—"We don't do body counts," as General Tommy Franks put it—the number is estimated to be anywhere between twenty-five thousand and one hundred thousand.

Statistics, however, don't have the power to move our hearts and minds. For this, a recent story must suffice to bring home the cruelty of this war. On April 16th, 2005, Californian Marla Ruzicka and her Iraqi colleague Faiz Ali Salim were killed when their car was caught between a suicide car bomber and a U.S. military convoy. Marla was the founder of the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) in 2003, an NGO that began as a one-woman operation and grew to include dedicated Iraqis who compiled statistics of Iraqi civilian casualties. Marla and her colleagues pursued this difficult, heart-wrenching job by going door to door in a country that has already sent most other aid agencies packing.

In an obituary in the *Christian Science Monitor* Jill Carroll wrote that Ruzicka

made a name for herself working for Global Exchange, the US organization that sent field workers to Afghanistan to count civilian casualties. After the Iraq war, she moved her push for an accurate count of civilian casualties to Baghdad. At a time when the International Committee of the Red Cross and United Nations were leaving Iraq, Marla started CIVIC. Through that, she helped Iraqi families navigate the process of claiming compensation from the US military for injuries and deaths. When she died Marla was traveling to visit some of the many Iraqi families she was working to help... She would point out, this happens to Iraqis every day and no one notices or even cares. There are no newspaper articles or investigations into what happens to them. For most of them, there was only Marla.³

The tragic fate of such an advocate for justice invites thoughtful Christians to come to terms with the Shadow of Death, *especially* in the midst of Eastertide.

Unfortunately, our churches are not particularly adept at navigating such difficult and distressing terrain. Instead, we tend to sugar-coat—or should I say chocolate-cover—this highest of Christian holy days, burying it under flowers and swelling hymns and egg-hunting. Our public theology of Easter is, consequently, experiencing diminishing returns. We have forgotten that the resurrection accounts in our gospels *themselves* took place under the Shadow of Death. It is because these Bible stories narrate a real world like our own that they can offer us true hope to resist the reign of death, rather than some sort of religious inoculation against its consequences. To recover this tough character of our scriptures, however, demands a little re-contextualization.

³ Posted at www.alternet.org/waroniraq/21780/ on April 18, 2005.

Let us take as an example Luke's famous account of the road to Emmaus—perhaps the church's most traditional and beloved Easter text (Luke 24:13ff). This moving story narrates a conversation between an unrecognized Jesus and two obscure disciples. As the exchange along the road makes perfectly clear, Jesus' execution presented a crushing blow to the movement he founded—a chilling Shadow of Death. Nevertheless, this little vignette has managed to become profoundly sentimentalized in our churches, every bit as domesticated by our pious traditions as the Last Supper story.

“When thoughts turn to the Last Supper,” one art critic has said, “we seem to see only Leonardo DaVinci's representation before us.” The Upper Room appears as a serene moment of beatific communion in a chapel-like setting. But this image, so deeply ingrained our religious consciousness, could not be further from the scene narrated in the gospels. What we find there is a frantic, furtive, and clandestine gathering of hunted fugitives on the verge of a nervous breakdown, hiding out in the attic of a safe house. The scene is held together only by a determined Jesus, even though he knows these companions will abandon him when the authorities come after him, as they inevitably will.⁴

A similar chocolate-covering obscures the road to Emmaus. It exists in popular churchly imagination as a contemplative stroll through a shaded landscape, a casual tête-à-tête delightfully interrupted by the Risen Lord (think, for example, of the famous religious painting by Swiss pietist artist Robert Zund [1827-1909], in which the warm and tranquil scene looks as if it was concocted by the Hudson River Scholl of romantic art). The scenario portrayed in Luke's gospel, however, is far more suggestive of present day Iraq. Only forty-eight hours earlier Jesus of Nazareth was summarily executed by the Roman military, in a fashion all too familiar to Palestinian Jews of the time: as a dissident prosecuted for resisting the “occupying authority.” A little narrative common sense, therefore, would suggest that the two disciples in our story would be neither leisurely nor calmly reflective at this particular moment. Rather, they would be on the lam, hustling down a back road, getting the hell out from Dodge so they won't meet the same fate as their leader.

Hustling Down the Emmaus Back Road

What does the text tell us about these co-conspirators trying to “melt into the countryside” (as the Pentagon routinely says of Iraqi insurgents)? Their destination is interesting: Emmaus, a village (in Greek, *koomee*) so obscure that it receives no other mention in the scriptures. There are no less than four different traditions concerning its location, ranging from four to twenty miles outside of Jerusalem. Emmaus is attested to elsewhere only in two ancient sources:

- In the book of Maccabees it is a site where the vastly outnumbered Jewish guerillas heroically defeated the Syrian invaders (I Maccabees 3:40-4:15).
- Josephus notes that the victorious Roman emperor Vespasian, just a few years after vanquishing the Judean revolt in 70 AD, made a political point by settling 800 Roman military veterans at “a place called Emmaus” (Wars VII:6:6).

These references suggest that our little village had a reputation for homegrown resistance, which the empire later felt some need to control by turning it into a military colony. (Such a scenario is certainly familiar to our own imperial context.)

As our disciples are “high-tailing it for the border” so they can lay low for a while, Luke tells us they “were discussing all the things that had happened” (24:14). No doubt! This was likely an animated conversation between labored breaths and anxious glances over their shoulders. They were probably blaming each other for the mess they'd gotten into, wondering what their next move might be, lamenting Roman kangaroo justice, cursing the colonizers, even cursing Jesus for failing to deliver on his promises of a new

⁴ See my *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Orbis, 1988), p. 358ff.

social order. They had a *lot* to talk about, but this was no peripatetic philosophical wander. Rather, this was a grief-laden, scared stiff, and contentious debriefing under the Shadow of Death.

Though one would never imagine the scene this way based on our tradition of religious art, a couple of simple exegetical notes confirm my suspicions. First, the distinctively Lukan verb for “discussion” in verses 14 & 15 is *hoomilein*, from which we get our term *homiletics*. It appears only two other times in the New Testament both in Acts:

- In Acts 20:11 it describes Paul’s sobering farewell sermon at Troas, a serious through-the-night conversation about how the young movement would survive;
- In Acts 24:26 it refers to Paul’s conversations with the Roman governor Felix concerning “justice, self-control and coming judgment,” a discussion, we are told, that scared the ruler to death.

Hoomilein refers to weighty matters, then, not philosophizing removed from real-world consequences. Moreover, in the New Testament the verb *suzeetein* almost always connotes a passionate dispute, while the phrase “all the things that had happened” in Luke 24:14 refers elsewhere specifically to the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus or to parallel sufferings of disciples.

The disciples’ preoccupation with this intense and even desperate discussion may explain why they didn’t immediately recognize their teacher. Or, as Daniel Berrigan has suggested, perhaps they didn’t know Jesus because he was so beat up and disfigured by his torturers. Indeed, Luke tells us later in his account that the Risen Jesus’ scars were still visible (Luke 24:39), and after all, tradition holds that he’d “been to hell and back.” Or it may be that Luke is working here in the midrashic traditions of the “incognito Second Coming”; the rabbis often speculated that the prophet Elijah would return anonymously, to see if the world is ready to receive him.

In any case, the Stranger’s response makes it clear that he has walked in on a heated debate, for 24:17 reads literally: What words were you throwing back and forth at each other (Greek *antiballetete*, only here in the New Testament) while you were making your way?” And they looked gloomy (Greek *skuthroopoi*.)” Jesus perceives them as struggling with each other, and in a bad mood. And Cleopas’ retort betrays a distinct tone of impatience: “So are you the *only* one in Jerusalem who doesn’t know what’s been going down these last few days?” he asks dryly (24:18). Or maybe he is exhibiting a wary defensiveness. They are fugitives, and who is this unknown person asking prying questions?

Now that Luke has established sufficient *angst* in the scene, we can detect a certain delicious irony in how the Stranger plays dumb (given what he’s just been through). “Huh??!!” he says with a straight face (24:19a). “Do tell!” Cleopas, passionately if a bit recklessly, launches in to the whole sordid affair: how Jesus of Nazareth had resuscitated the prophetic tradition, igniting hope in people longing for *shalom*. And how *his own* leaders (bloody collaborators!) had railroaded him and sold him out to the imperial oppressors, who strung him up (24:19b-20). Finally his frustration boils over: “And we had *trusted* (Greek *eelpizomen*) that he was the One to liberate Israel” (24:21). His bitter disappointment, his sense of betrayal, his confusion is palpable.

It is not difficult to feel empathy for Cleopas here. He had staked his life on the hope that *this* messianic movement, unlike so many others in recent generations, would finally break the yoke of oppression that had strangled his people for centuries. He’d committed himself to the risky business of challenging the native aristocracy and their imperial overlords. But things had turned out all wrong. Jesus’ march on Jerusalem (Luke 19:28ff) had resulted not in a popular uprising, but instead had come crashing down in a vicious counterinsurgent thrust by the colonizers. Their leader had been publicly executed, and they had fled for their lives, an all points bulletin hanging over their heads.

And if that weren't enough, miserable Cleopas concludes his sad tale by relating, with apparent aggravation, a rumor circulating among some of his dispirited companions—*women's* rumors mind you—about visions of angels and an empty tomb (24:22-24). The authorities had probably hijacked Jesus' body, everything was falling apart, the movement was in disarray, and they'd been arguing about it all day, and frankly, *he'd had it*.

It shouldn't be difficult for modern Americans to imagine this traumatized scene. Think of how Civil Rights activists were feeling on April 6, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. (Here another image comes to mind: the famous photo taken of the balcony of the Lorraine motel the moment after King was shot on April 4, 1968. Three men stand over King's body, frantically gesturing towards the shooter, while one kneels beside King—revealed later to be a government agent.) We'd better believe that Martin Luther King's lieutenants were going crazy trying to figure out what *really* had gone down two days before, why and how their leader had been gunned down, who was behind it, what it meant for the movement, and whether they might be next on the hit list.

This is the real world of COINTELPRO and conspiracy, of imperial “justice” meted out by good old boys who can hardly contain their glee at the prophet's demise, of stern calls for law and order in the wake of this “tragedy” by the very ones who engineered it. It is the world of popular movements on the verge of a major social impact being aborted in the face of State repression.

This was hardly a stroll in the park. But it is *this* world that Luke's story also inhabits, not the fantasy world we so often imagine in our churches. We North American Christians rarely grapple with such matters: we are too preoccupied with institutional survival to entertain the possibility that our whole nation might be captive to the same Powers that took out Jesus and King. We talk about “power in the name of Jesus” but are too timid to interrogate public addiction or high corporate crimes. We speculate blithely about the “last days” while endorsing world-historic shifts in U.S. military and economic policies that are chewing up millions of the lives *we* say God loves, and that are destroying the land and sea and air *we* say God created, and that are usurping the glory *we* say belongs to God alone. We are content to keep our heads down and examine the finer points of doctrine or liturgy or church demographics, well insulated from the Shadow of Death.

Jesus, on the other hand, as portrayed in Luke's beautiful story, *embraces* the trauma. His response to Cleopas is instructive. He doesn't scold them for mixing religion and politics, nor does he redirect them to turn inwards to a life of the spirit, nor does he console them with pat theories of history. Instead, he walks with these poor boys for a few miles, inquiring, listening to their pain. And then he responds with, of all things, *a Bible study* (something which makes modern theological liberals blush, yet which hardly fits in the hermeneutic program of conservatives). To be precise, the first recorded Bible study in the life of an Easter church that hasn't even been birthed yet at Pentecost. “OK fellas,” Jesus says, “it's a bad time alright. So open your Bibles to the prophets and let's re-read history together under the Shadow of Death.”

Reading History through the Prophets

Luke tells us that Jesus addresses these fit-to-be-tied disciples as “fools” (24:25). But the Greek term *anontois* refers simply to those who don't quite get it, who find the truth as yet unintelligible (cf Romans 1:14; Galatians 3:1,3). He knows their hearts are “sluggish” (Greek *bradeis*), as indeed are ours. Because we, like Cleopas and company, forever refuse to embrace the counterintuitive wisdom of the Hebrew prophets.

The prophets tell us to defend the poor, but we lionize the rich. The prophets tell us that horses and chariots cannot save us, but we are transfixed by the apparent omnipotence of modern military technology. The prophets tell us to forgo idolatry, but we compulsively fetishize the work of our own hands. Above all, the prophets warn us that the way to liberation in a world locked down by the spiral of violence, the way to redemption in a world of enslaving addictions, the way to true transformation in a world of deadened conscience and numbing conformity, is the way of nonviolent, sacrificial, creative love. But we who are slow

of heart—a euphemism for not having courage—instead remain fiercely loyal to ever more fabulous myths of redemptive violence, practices of narcissism and delusions of our own nobility.

And what we balk at most is the Stranger’s punchline, the watershed query upon which our theological reading of history hangs: “Was it not necessary (Greek *edei*) that Messiah should suffer?” (24:26). This is the imperfect form of a technical apocalyptic term that appears throughout the New Testament. It refers to the fact that an official reaction to prophetic witness is *inevitable*. This is *not* a rhetorical question for Christological catechizing about cosmic propitiation, the way traditional atonement theories have it. It is rather the ultimate challenge to our deepest assumptions about society and the cosmos, the taproot counter-assertion that unmasks our profound captivity to the logic of domination and retributive justice. The prophet’s death is not *necessary*, given the character of God; it is, however, *inevitable*, given the character of the State. No one who pays attention to history can dispute the truth of this assertion.

Because North Americans keep wanting the good guys to win, we are forced to make believe that even the worst sort of characters are the good guys. We strive to manage history from the top down, to control it with our technologies, to win all battles with overwhelming power. And the prophets keep talking about revolution from the bottom up, the wisdom of outsiders, the power of the least. Like the disciples in Luke’s story, we Christians understand enough to acknowledge that Jesus lived a prophet’s life, but not enough to recognize the historically redemptive power of his prophet’s death.

“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the scriptures” (24:27). The verb is *dieermeeneuen*; every other time it appears in the New Testament it means to translate into one’s native tongue (Acts 9:36), including the interpretation of ecstatic languages (I Corinthians 12:30; 14:5,13,27). In other words, Jesus is patiently translating this counterintuitive biblical wisdom into the plainest possible terms so these demoralized disciples can get it. And that, I want to suggest, is what the task of our Easter theological reflection should be about under the Shadow of Death.

More than any other gospel writer, Luke portrays Jesus as using Israel’s prophets for his own interpretive lens:

- “God has raised up a mighty savior for us ... as spoken through the mouth of God’s holy *prophets* from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” (Luke 1:69-71)
- Jesus stood up to read and the scroll of the *prophet* Isaiah was given to him... And Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no *prophet* is accepted in the prophet's hometown." (4:17,27)
- "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Human One... for that is what their ancestors did to the *prophets*." (6:22-23)
- They glorified God, saying, "A great *prophet* has risen among us!" ...“What did you go out to see? A *prophet*? Yes, and more than a *prophet*.” (7:16, 26)
- The disciples answered, “Some say you are John the Baptist; others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient *prophets* has arisen.” (9:19)
- “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the *prophets* in the kingdom of God, and you thrown out... Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a *prophet* to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”” (13:28, 33-34)

- Jesus took the twelve aside and said, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Human One by the *prophets* will be accomplished." (18:31)

These prophets are the ones who throughout the national history engaged the way things *were* with the vision of what *could* and *should* be. They question authority, make trouble, refuse to settle, interrupt business as usual, speak truth to power, give voice to the voiceless. They stir up the troops, get the natives restless, picket Presidential palaces, question foreign policies based on military and economic domination—and are accused of treason in times of national war-making.

For being the inconvenient conscience of the nation the prophets are jailed, or exiled, or killed—and then, once safely disposed of, they get a national holiday or a street named after them. Once canonized, they are thereafter ignored by their public patrons. Luke's Jesus makes this point crystal clear in his tirade against such officials:

Woe to you scribes! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute" ...from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah..." (Luke 11:47-51).

What was true then "from A to Z" continues now from Sitting Bull to Martin King. Nevertheless, it is the prophets themselves—not their corporate-sponsored hagiographies—who teach us how our collective story should be read, says the Stranger. Their witness, however maligned by those in power, represents the hermeneutic key to the whole tradition. And that's why it was *inevitable* that Messiah would follow in their footsteps.

Whose Shock, Whose Awe?

In the first half of the Emmaus story, the inaugural appearance of the Risen Christ is in the form of a Stranger. But in the second half of the story, he is famously revealed in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:28-32). In the middle of that episode, after Jesus has vanished, the two disciples exclaim, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (24:32). The verb "to open up" (Greek *dianoigo*) in every other appearance in the gospels refers to the opening of deaf ears (Mark 7:34-35), of a closed womb (Luke 2:23), of blind eyes (Luke 24:31) and of a hardened heart (Acts 16:14). The only other time it is employed in relation to the scriptures is when Paul struggles to persuade his synagogue compatriots that "it was *inevitable* that Jesus had to suffer" (Acts 17:3). This underlines the point of the Emmaus Road conversation: our perspective on traumatic historic events is not ultimately a matter of rational persuasion, but of opening blind eyes and deaf ears and hard hearts to the difficult truth of discipleship under the Shadow of Death. And when our hearts are truly opened, they will burn with renewed commitment.

With this jolt of recognition/revelation, the narrative reverses directions. The fugitive disciples now return to the capital city to face its dangers (24:33a). The next scene (24:33b-36) shows the Emmaus road pair relating their experience to the other disciples. Jesus appears again to the whole group, and Luke reports that they were "afraid and awestruck" (24:37).

These two Greek adjectives are worth noting. The first is *ptoëoo*, which means in the active mood "to terrify," and in the passive mood (used here) to "be terrified." The only other time it appears in the New Testament is in Luke 21:9: "When you hear of wars and upheavals, do not be terrified; these things are *inevitable*." It is understandable that these disciples would be horrified: crucifixion was the preeminent form of Roman State terrorism. This gruesome form of public execution—reserved for political dissidents—had only one function: to intimidate those in the occupied territories, in the name, of course, of imperial "national

security.” It was a very effective way of broadcasting the message: “Look what happens to those who think they can challenge the sovereignty of Caesar.”

But the other adjective is *emphobos*, which in the New Testament is reserved for connoting awe in presence of God, or of the Risen Christ. So these disciples were on one hand cowering before a fearful State, yet on the other were reeling before the unimaginable possibility that Rome’s ultimate form of social control had not defeated Jesus. Why does the prospect of his resurrection generate such strong reaction here? *Not* because corpse resuscitation upset the laws of nature—that’s a problem only for modern folk, and it mostly generates skepticism. No, the resurrection was overwhelming to the disciples because it signaled that Jesus’ Way had been vindicated by God—especially that most difficult bit about dying for the cause rather than killing for the cause.

This vocabulary suggests that the disciples were caught between two types of fear: the terror produced by the state, particularly in times of war, and the awe that comes in the presence of Divine Power. How contemporary sounding is this dilemma in our world, riddled with terrorism both official and ad hoc. It poses a revealing question to us, sharpened intensely by this last Iraq war. Who generates “shock and awe” in our lives? Is it the Pentagon’s power of death over life, or the biblical God’s power of life over death? This is the preeminent theological question for our time.

The Prophetic Vocation of “Connecting the Dots”

The last scene, in counterpoint, is almost whimsical, as Jesus tries to convince his friends that he’s not a ghost, having already gone unrecognized once (24:38-39). Tired, he asks in effect: “Man, these have been a long couple of days and I’ve been through a lot; does anyone have a sandwich for a brother?” (24:41). Then, after breaking the fast he declared at the Last Supper (Luke 22:16-19), Jesus resumes the Bible study he began on the road to Emmaus: “And he said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you, while I was with you: that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me’” (24:44).

The following verse reads: “Then he opened their minds, so that they might understand the scriptures” (24:45). These two verbs used here tell an interesting story. Again (as in verse 32) we encounter *dianoigo*, to open faculties of perception that have been shut down by empire. The verb “to understand” (Greek *sunieimi*) is an unusual one, meaning to bring together all the data; I would paraphrase it as “connecting the dots.” In the New Testament it is usually employed to describe those many situations in which disciples are *unable* to make such connections (e.g. Luke 2:50; 18:34; Acts 7:25).

Both verbs are specifically connected in the gospels with the story of the call of Isaiah (Is 6:1ff; see Luke 8:10; Acts 28:26-27). Jesus is thus reminding his followers of something the prophets long ago stipulated: people will oppose the Word of God because it challenges us to *change*. And what we resist most fiercely is, again, that terrible truth: “It is *inevitable* that Messiah should suffer at the hands of the leaders” (24:46). Because this prophetic vocation (and fate) is one disciples are now invited to share: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses (Greek *martures*) of these things” (24:47-28). Everyone in America may want to be a millionaire, but no one wants to be a martyr.

Here, then, is what we learn from the Emmaus road story:

1. The resurrected Jesus appears first a Stranger, indeed one needing hospitality. Let this be a Christological lesson to the church!
2. Rather than standing idly among peaceable religious folk who are insulated and aloof from the world, this Risen Christ is moving alongside disciples who are in trouble because they have sought to change it.

3. Jesus is pastoral, seeking to know the pain of those struggling with a specifically political context, rather than offering saccharine spiritual assurances of personal immunity from historical consequences.
4. Yet he is also prophetic, his biblical analysis centered around a fierce prophetic hermeneutic, in order to reframe the empire's historiography with the alternative story of transformation from the margins.

How desperately we U.S. Christians need *this* Jesus to walk with us under our present imperial Shadow of Death! And how urgent it is that we re-read our Bibles and our history through the lens of the *prophets*.

Today, social conservatives and political oligarchs have hijacked the Bible in the public discourse in the U.S. But let us not think we are bereft of practitioners of this Emmaus road kind of theological reflection. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Finkenwald seminary mounted resistance to the Nazi Reich, and his profound *Letters and Papers from Prison* survived his execution. Dorothy Day's reflections on serving the poor in the context of the Catholic Worker movement remind us of the "long loneliness" of solidarity. Exiled Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel's defiant tomes birthed hope in the midst of her country's genocide. Philip Berrigan's persistent nonviolent witness against the arms race over four decades never let us forget that we live under the Shadow of Nuclear Death.

But it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who best exemplified the task of doing theology on the run. In particular in this time of war we ought to revisit his prophetic "Beyond Vietnam" speech, given on April 4th, 1967 at Riverside Church, exactly a year almost to the hour he was gunned down in Memphis. For this speech is a magnificent example of "connecting the dots" between the three great pathologies of American imperial culture: racism, militarism and poverty.⁵ King "and all the other prophets" can help us re-read our own national history.

W. A. Williams concluded his own great study of this history with a pressing query which is, I believe, ultimately theological: "Do we have either the imagination or the courage to say 'no' to empire? It is now our responsibility. It has to do with how we live and how we die. We as a culture have run out of imperial games to play."⁶ May the North American church rediscover courage and character enough to engage this question, buoyed by an Easter faith and tutored by the prophetic tradition.

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⁵ The text and an audio excerpt of this speech can be found at www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm

⁶ Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life*.