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## *The Gentle Man Who Thundered*

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### **A Sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr. The Third Sunday of Easter - Year A**

It's just the two of them now, on their way home to Emmaus. They walk slowly, backs bent over and heads hanging down. They whisper a few words every now and then, but not for any real reason or to any particular person.

They are going home because they have no place else to go. They left their village several years ago to follow a stranger and his friends. He had told them things they hadn't known, shown them things they hadn't seen and promised them that they could change the world. But, now he was dead.

Someone else joins them on the road. They don't recognize him. But, when they tell him what has just happened in Jerusalem, he takes them back to their holy scriptures and gives them a new way to understand the words. He tells them that the death they thought was the end is really the beginning. Their hearts burn within them as they listen to him.

They invite him to eat with them. When he breaks the bread, they recognize him and, as they do, he vanishes. The stranger who used scripture to reinterpret death was, in fact, the one who died. He was Jesus.

They get up and return to Jerusalem and their friends. This time at a brisk pace, leaning forward, looking up and talking excitedly.

And, as they talk, it dawns on them. They had been talking to a dead man. Jesus was not alive, as if his death had been healed the way an illness is cured.

Their experience was of something different. Jesus was risen. He had been taken up and assumed into the life of God. He was speaking to them from outside of existence, something beyond human life and death.

And, then, something else dawns on them. Jesus showed no signs of resentment.

It's surprising, really. He is beyond the reach of the powers and principalities that victimized him. There is nothing more for him to fear. He is already dead.

Yet, he is not pointing a finger at anybody. He is not accusing anyone of anything. He is not looking to avenge himself. He is not even seeking justice.

He is, instead, coming back to his friends. He is showing himself to them. He is reinterpreting their scriptures for them, so that they too might live without resentment. He is helping them to imagine a way of living in the world that is not consumed with worrying about death and how to protect themselves against it.

He is showing them how to imagine life as if death were not.

Clarence Leonard Jordan was born in Talbotton Georgia on July 29, 1912. He was the middle of seven children. His father was a banker and ran a general store. His mother stayed home and taught him the spiritual virtues that would guide his life.

In words worth repeating on this Mothers' Day, he wrote, "I believe that Mother is only God come to earth and that in Heaven God will be Mother gone to Heaven. Whether this be so or not God has certainly created a lot of himself into our mothers."

Jordan, however, knew the ugliness of resentment when he saw it.

His favorite hymn as a child was, perhaps not surprisingly, "Jesus loves the little children." As he looked at the economic condition of the black children around him, though, he began to wonder if God had favorite children. "Were the little black children precious in God's sight just like the little white children?"

Jordan couldn't answer the question.

"A little light came," he says, "when I began to realize that perhaps it wasn't God's doings, but man's. God didn't turn them away from our churches - we did. God didn't pay them low wages - we did. God didn't make them live in another section of town and in miserable huts - we did. God didn't make ragged, hungry little boys pick rotten oranges and fruit out of the garbage can and eat them - we did."

In 1942, Jordan and several others purchased 440 acres of red-clay fields in the southwest part of the state near Americus. They moved onto the land and founded an intentional Christian community there based on total sharing and racial equality. Koinonia Farm was to be a "demonstration plot of the Kingdom of God" -- a living parable of reconciliation, where there would be no favored children.

"Never did Paul or Peter or Stephen point to an empty tomb as evidence of the resurrection," Jordan said. "The evidence was the spirit-filled fellowship."

By 1956, the farm had become a meaningful witness. The community had grown to sixty people, including two black members and several black novices. Many other informal friendships with local black families figured into the daily life of the community. Koinonia was also enjoying a period of financial stability as its vegetable markets, roadside stands, and egg business flourished.

But, then, Jordan found himself staring resentment squarely in the face.

Although he hadn't intended to be political, he put himself and the farm in the middle of the civil rights movement when he supported two black students in their application to a state business college here in Atlanta. They were not admitted, but that didn't stop the backlash back at home.

It was as if the mere presence of the community threatened the life of the social, legal and economic structures of the Jim Crow South that surrounded it.

Members were attacked and beaten on the streets of Americus and the surrounding towns. Buildings on the property were bombed. Roadside stands were vandalized and destroyed. Children were bullied and otherwise ostracized by their classmates in school.

Farm signs were defaced. Hostile notes were left at the front gate. Gun shots rang out as cars sped by at night.

Members were turned away from stores, shops, and doctor's offices. Loans were refused and accounts were closed. Insurance policies were canceled. Even the crop dusters quit.

Jordan turned, as he had many times before, to the Sermon on the Mount. As translated in his Cotton Patch Gospel, Jesus says: "You are all God's people when others call you names, and harass you and tell all kinds of false tales on you just because you follow me. Be cheerful and good-humored, because your spiritual advantage is great. For that's the way they treated men of conscience in the past."

Koinonia lost over one half of its members. And, several of those who remained wanted to move out of the South. They even looked at land in New Jersey.

But, in the end, Jordan wanted to stay. He believed, in the way that so many Southerners do, that the land had a claim on him. Asking him to sell the land, he said, was like asking him to sell his mother.

The farm was reborn in the 1960s. It became a place of hospitality for those working in the civil rights movement. And, although the farm hosted training sessions on nonviolence and seminars on voter registration,

Jordan refused to change his vision. He refused to narrow his focus to the demand for equal rights - though he understood that equal treatment under the law was a necessary step. His vision remained the creation of a community of reconciliation.

Jordan died in late October of 1969. He was dressed in his blue jeans and buried the next day.

One of his biographers describes him as "a gentle man who thundered."

Another way to describe his life would be to say that he lived as if he had been one of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He had listened to the scriptures, as interpreted by Jesus, and looked for a way to live without resentment. In the founding of Koinonia, he had imagined a way of living in the world that was not consumed with worrying about death and how to protect himself against it. In refusing to leave it, he had, as much as any man can, I suppose, stared resentment in the face without being the first one to blink.

And, his witness - his living as if death were not - put his death in a different light.

As they lowered the cedar coffin into the red clay of the farm, Faith Fuller, the two-year-old daughter of a couple who had recently moved to Koinonia and would soon start Habitat for Humanity, burst spontaneously into song.

Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday, dear Clarence,

Happy birthday to you.

Amen.

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You might be interested to know:

- I have taken from James Alison the insight that what was striking about Jesus as he appeared to his disciples on the road to Emmaus was the absence of resentment. Alison uses the notion of living free of resentment to illustrate how the Eucharist works to collapse the difference between "we" and "they." See James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 2001), pp. 41-44, 121.
- For a psycho-philosophical treatment of how our attitudes about death influence the way we approach life, see Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).
- For the story of Clarence Jordan, I have relied on the superb book by Charles Marsh titled *The Beloved Community*. See Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 51 -86.