

Touching the Hem

Diane Brown

He has summoned them to the last meal
and (as a shot scatters birds from the wheat)
he scatters their hands from the loaves
with his word: they fly up to him;
they flap, terrified, all around the table
and seek a way out. But no use: *he*
like a twilight hour, Is everywhere.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

MY GRANDMA DIED THREE YEARS AGO. What I have of her now is a collection of odds and ends of memories. I have a few physical reminders: her senior class ring from Jordan High School, an old can full of buttons, and a photo of the two of us at my college graduation. The memories are gradually turning into anecdotes that I tell myself over and over. Sitting on her porch in the summer waiting for the hummingbirds. Wandering through her rose bushes while she gently shook the flowers to get the rain water off the petals. Rice pudding on Sunday nights. Her bird named Pete. Her beautiful white hair and the great legs that she always seemed to show off. Reading Emily Dickinson to her during the long, lonely nights as her body weakened and finally gave in to the cancer that took her once-strong body.

All I have, and all I really ever had, were my impressions—the story of her life from my vantage point. Little bits and pieces of her life, never anything close to the whole. I never knew why she and my grandpa slept in separate bedrooms or what she thought about God or if she prayed. I never asked what she remembered about falling in love or why she gave up painting or how it felt to be a widow for fifteen years.

I knew her the only way I could—through the eyes of a granddaughter. And while I spent most of my life in the same city she did and seeing her often, I don't know the whole person. I can't even come close. Much of it is a fiction, stories I weave and tell myself in an attempt to create or know or remember the whole of Thirza Isabelle Berrett Brown.

If I only have fragments of a woman I knew well—a woman I

watched live and die and be buried—I have to wonder how little I really know of Jesus Christ, or, for that matter, how well he was known by the people who wrote about him, even those who watched him live and die and be buried. I am forced to rely on the words and stories as they are told in the New Testament. I read the parables as they sift through the fingers of generations of authors, translators, and editors. And I have to accept the silence of all the gaps. Uncomfortable with the awkward silence, I have filled in many of the gaps with my own perceptions and guesses. Thus much of my sense of the historical Jesus is a construction, built out of the details of my own time and place. I have fair skin, so I always assumed he did too. I speak English, so when I “hear” the Sermon on the Mount in my head, I hear it spoken in English, as if Christ literally spoke it the way I read it in the King James Version. I hear him saying, in English, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The drawings on the wall in Primary showed him with a beard, so in my construction of Jesus he is bearded. I have been taught that he was the son of God, so I often assume that his neighbors in the Nazareth believed that too—that they knew about Gabriel, and angels appearing to shepherds in a field in Bethlehem, and wise men bearing gifts. But most likely they didn’t. Most likely they saw an illegitimate son who spent time in a carpenter’s shop.

And I wonder about the many people who saw or heard him only once—who had only one glimpse of the man I would 2,000 years later try to know or worship or understand. At the marriage at Cana, in what is now labeled as his first miracle, Jesus turned water into wine. How many of the wedding guests knew as they drank that they were taking part in an event that would later be called the miracle at Cana? How many even knew what Jesus had done? I am sure that many drank the wine and toasted the bride and groom without any knowledge of anything out of the ordinary. Except perhaps that they were drinking an exceptionally good wine.

I see the lepers who were healed and I think about the nine who didn’t return to thank Jesus. Then I focus on one of the nine and wonder how he thought of Jesus the healer. What did he tell his family? What did it feel like to hold his wife after his quick change from pariah to ordinary meridian-of-time guy? In moments of nostalgia, how would he have made sense of being made whole by a stranger? How did he make sense of sickness and health?

Or what of Simon of Cyrene, ostensibly minding his own business when he found himself with the task of bearing the cross? He couldn’t have known that the cross he shouldered would soon become a symbol of death and redemption. Simon, the cross bearer, walking the uneven stones of the Via Dolorosa, never knowing the place he held in a story

that would be told and preached for longer than he could imagine. He has no past and no future for us. Just a prop in a passion play, just an hour or so of his otherwise unrecorded life.

I believe in particular individuals living and making meaning out of a particular historical moment. We can't see more than partially, from a particular perspective. Sometimes I can embrace the partial as partial. I can see the fragments and fight the urge to fill in the gaps with invention in a rush toward a completion that is a fiction.

Like any version I tell myself of the life of Christ, I too am partial and fragmented. I am broken in pieces. Paul taught that the church is one body of Christ. I sense the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ as a metaphor of fragments and breaks. If the church is the body of Christ, it is a body that is broken, where an arm sometimes cuts off a hand, where limbs ache. It is not a whole perfect body.

Two events from the life of Jesus of Nazareth help me sit still in the middle of fragments and shards. Two brief events that comfort me when I can't make sense of the whole, when the center cannot hold. The first is the healing of the woman "diseased with an issue of blood twelve years" (Matt. 9:20). She did not seek all of Jesus, just a hem of his garment. And she was healed because of her faith in Jesus but she was also healed because she recognized the relation between a part and the whole. The hem was sufficient. It was her sense of the metonymy of the hem that allowed the plenitude and grace of healing.

The second story was one of my junior high school favorites: the story of the loaves and fishes. I remember having that same "How did he *do it?*" awe that I had watching magic tricks. And I remember the common interpretation of why Jesus asked his disciples to gather up the leftovers: Here Jesus teaches us not to be wasteful. Now I read the gathering of crumbs from the barley loaves as a parable about fragments. He told his disciples to "gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost" (John 6:12). I believe this is much more than a lesson on not wasting food. I believe Jesus is instructing his disciples to act out the attention he pays to the shattered pieces of our lives.

In contrast to the leftover barley loaves, or the fragments of our whole selves, or the broken church body of Christ, I believe—I hope to believe—in a completion beyond the fragments.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is about wholeness—an end to the fragmentation and decay of life and death. If we live now in fragments—without closure—we see that in the mosaic of our lives, there are pieces missing. Pieces that are upside down and out of place. I try to resist the urge to put a frame on the individual pieces and call it done. It is not. I am not.

Christ resurrected is not a missionary film strip or a lesson on Easter.

It is a miracle of wholeness that I can only guess at because it does not match any model I know. And yet I want to believe. I want to believe that if the stones that surround the tomb where Christ was buried could talk, they would tell of an end to decay. They would tell of real and ultimate healing.

In the odds and ends of my faith resides a tenuous hope. It is a hope that I might be gathered up like so many barley loaves. Gathered and blessed by kind, kind hands.