



Poets and the Faith 2024

Denise Levertov

Carol O'Connor



ST PETER'S
EASTERN HILL



(b. 1923 Essex; d. 1997 Seattle)

1. The Servant Girl at Emmaus

She listens, listens, holding
her breath. Surely that voice
is his—the one
who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,
as no one ever had looked?
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?

Surely those hands were his,
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?

Surely that face—?

The man they'd crucified for sedition and blasphemy.
The man whose body disappeared from its tomb.
The man it was rumored now some women had seen this morning, alive?

Those who had brought this stranger home to their table
don't recognize yet with whom they sit.
But she in the kitchen, absently touching the winejug she's to take in,
a young Black servant intently listening,

swings round and sees
the light around him
and is sure.



Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus, by Deigo Velázquez (1599-1660).

2. St Thomas Didymus

In the hot street at noon I saw him
a small man
gray but vivid, standing forth
beyond the crowd's buzzing
holding in desperate grip his shaking
teethgnashing son,
and thought him my brother.

I heard him cry out, weeping and speak
those words,
Lord, I believe, help thou
mine unbelief,

and knew him
my twin:

a man whose entire being
had knotted itself
into the one tightdrawn question,
Why,
why has this child lost his childhood in suffering,
why is this child, who will soon be a man
tormented, torn, twisted?
Why is he cruelly punished
who has done nothing except be born?

The twin of my birth
was not so close
as that man I heard
say what my heart
sighed with each beat, my breath silently
cried in and out,
in and out.

After the healing,
he, with his wondering
newly peaceful boy, receded;
no one
dwells on the gratitude, the astonished joy,
the swift
acceptance and forgetting.

I did not follow
to see their changed lives.

What I retained
was the flash of kinship.

Despite
all that I witnessed,
his question remained
my question, throbbed like a stealthy cancer,
known
only to doctor and patient. To others

I seemed well enough.

So it was
that after Golgotha
my spirit in secret
lurched in the same convulsed writhings
that tore that child
before he was healed.
And after the empty tomb
when they told me He lived, had spoken to Magdalen,
told me
that though He had passed through the door like a ghost
He had breathed on them
the breath of a living man—
even then
when hope tried with a flutter of wings
to lift me—
still, alone with myself,
my heavy cry was the same: *Lord,*
I believe,
help thou my unbelief.

I needed
blood to tell me the truth,
the touch
of blood. Even
my sight of the dark crust of it
round the nailholes
didn't thrust its meaning all the way through
to that manifold knot in me
that willed to possess all knowledge,
refusing to loosen
unless that insistence won
the battle I fought with life.

But when my hand
led by His hand's firm clasp
entered the unhealed wound,
my fingers encountering
rib-bone and pulsing heat,
what I felt was not
scalding pain, shame for my
obstinate need,
but light, light streaming
into me, over me, filling the room
as if I had lived till then
in a cold cave, and now
coming forth for the first time,
the knot that bound me unravelling,
I witnessed
all things quicken to color, to form,
my question
not answered but given
its part
in a vast unfolding design lit
by a risen sun.

3. Primary Wonder

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes; caps and bells.

And then

once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed one, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.