

We Had Hoped  
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May 4, 2014

Luke 24:13-35

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

17 And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

19 He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

25 Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

32 They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

34 They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## WE HAD HOPED

Two of Jesus’ former disciples are on the road to Emmaus. One is named Cleopas and one is not named. But, this we do know; both of these disciples are deeply discouraged.

When a stranger joins them on the road and asks them what they’re talking about, they tell the stranger about Jesus. Jesus was a prophet mighty in word in deed. But, then he was arrested, condemned and crucified.

They said, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

I want us to focus on three words, “we had hoped.”

That’s the imperfect tense for you grammar fans in the congregation. It’s a past tense indicating continuous action.

The disciples had been hoping for a long time that Jesus was the Messiah. But, the events on Good Friday for the most part had dashed those hopes. He had been in the tomb for three days.

But, that’s not all.

The disciples go on to tell this mystery man that strange things have been happening.

“A few of our women said that they saw a vision of angels at the tomb and that the tomb was empty. Some of our men went to see for themselves. The tomb was empty, and Jesus was not there.”

Don't mistake this for faith. The disciples on the road to Emmaus thought the talk of angels by the women was an idle tale, and the absence of Jesus' body was the final insult.

They didn't believe Jesus was alive.  
They believed their hopes for Jesus were dead and gone.

“We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.”

In other words they hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah. It's apparent in all the gospels that this was the hope of all the disciples and many others who followed Jesus.

And what is the job description for a Messiah?

Messiahs are political revolutionaries. They take up arms against injustice and oppression. There was no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

The final messianic proof was victory.

They had hoped ... but not any more.

## OUR DASHED HOPES

I've heard other people use that phrase.  
I've heard families say things like,  
“We had hoped the operation would be a success.  
We had hoped he wouldn't start drinking again.

We had hoped she would get that job.  
We had hoped they could put the marriage back together.”

But, hopes and prayers were not answered.

We had hoped ... those three innocent words capture the very painful moment when we realize that our dreams, whatever they are will not be coming true.

The things that we've worked for and longed for are now beyond reach.

Once challenged to write a short-story in six words, Ernest Hemingway supposedly replied by penning on a napkin:

“For Sale: Baby shoes, never used.”

It's not just the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but the gaping hole of all that could have happened but won't.

#### NO EASY ANSWERS

What do we say when someone talks like this?

Quite often the pain makes us a bit uncomfortable, and we try to move away from that pain.

Someone shares that his sister died. We sympathize for a moment before changing a topic. Someone has a terrible tragedy in her life, and we avoid her altogether, not because we don't care but because we don't know what to say.

Or we try to switch immediately from the disappointments of the past to hope for the future. We provide easy answers in the form of platitudes.

The sun will come up tomorrow.  
Time heals all wounds. Life goes on.  
Each day is a new day.

But, I have found that we cannot embrace the future until we honestly acknowledge the dashed hopes of the past.

Everyone here this morning knows what I mean. Everyone here this morning has had his or her hopes dashed. Everyone here this morning has said, “We had hoped...”

And maybe you're even saying that today.

Maybe you come to worship this morning carrying the heavy burden of deep disappointment. Maybe you too are on the road to Emmaus, turning your back on a past that is too painful to remember.

I don't want to make this sound too easy because it isn't easy.

In fact in some ways we always live with the regret and disappointment from things that didn't work out the way we wanted, from small things like the fly ball I dropped to lose the big game ... to bigger things like the words I didn't say before a loved one died.

I got over the dropped fly ball. (But, of course I do still remember it.) On the other hand there are some disappointments that stay with me. They will always be with me.

I had hoped ... but then I found myself on the road to regret and sorrow.

#### UNABLE TO SEE

We've read the story of the road to Emmaus many times. We know that the stranger with the two disciples is Jesus.

But, the disciples didn't know. The Bible tells us "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." In the gospels everyone is blind until Jesus helps them see.

And when Jesus heals the blind that miracle is often contrasted with the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. Once again the beloved hymn, *Amazing Grace* picks up on this theme.

"I once was blind but now I see."

Sight is a gift that must be granted by the Lord. We cannot see that new world coming until God gives us the gift of spiritual sight.

These discouraged and defeated disciples could not look beyond the sorrow of the moment. It would take a miracle to help them see again.

That's our experience as well.

Sometimes we are so bitterly disappointed that sight is not possible.

We have trouble making decisions. We can only see the dark side of things.

Even our closest friends and the ones we love the most come to us as strangers.

I would like to say that we can accept Jesus and "presto" everything is better. But, it doesn't work that way. In fact, it doesn't work that way in this story.

The stranger on the road first seems to bring a word of condemnation. He calls the disciples "foolish" and slow to believe what the prophets had foretold.

The words of the risen Christ can be hard to hear. When our hearts are broken, the promise of the resurrection doesn't seem real.

But, Jesus persisted in teaching these heartbroken disciples. He did not force them to see right away. He allowed them to grieve a future that would never be in order that that could hear and receive the future God had created and prepared for them.

#### EYES OPENED BY WORSHIP

Jesus did three things for these broken disciples.

First, he came to them and heard their story.

Second, he interpreted their experience through the lens of Scripture.

And third, he ate with them.

When the bread was broken, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

This experience allowed discouraged disciples to go in a different direction.

They were no longer on the road to Emmaus.

Now they were on the road to Jerusalem. They were going back to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard.

You may notice that this story follows the traditional pattern of worship.

We gather and greet one another, we read and hear the Word explained. We take the sacrament. And then we are charged to go and bring the good news of the resurrection to the world.

Last week we noted that John closed his gospel with Jesus encouraging Thomas to see and believe while also encouraging future disciples to believe even though they had not seen.

In the same way Luke closes his gospel with a story about two discouraged disciples that get a glimpse of the risen Lord through hearing the Word and the breaking of bread. The implication is that we can see Jesus in the same way.

The purpose of Christian worship is to encounter the risen Christ. When the word is proclaimed and the bread is broken we “see” him.

When we gather with disciples each week to hear the word and take the sacrament we are encouraged. We know that Jesus is here with us ... at least that's the idea.

## HOLY HEART BURN

But, I've found we are often reluctant to meet with Jesus. Like the travelers to Emmaus we are eager to discuss and debate, but when Jesus comes and stands among us we still do not recognize him.

It takes a while for debates to subside and hearts to warm.

And yet if we are to see Jesus, in the final analysis this is how we will see him, through burning hearts. That's how those disciples on the road to Emmaus described their encounter with Jesus.

Their hearts burned.

Their faith in Jesus was no longer just a matter of what they had thought and hoped. It was a matter of the heart. It was personal.

In today's lectionary passage from the book of Acts, the author, Luke, describes a similar process. Peter is transformed by Pentecostal fire from a coward to a powerful preacher.

He described the agony and cruelty of Christ's death on the cross, and then he drives home the fact that this Christ whom they crucified was the Son of God.

The Bible tells us the crowd was "cut to the heart." And in that moment of shared guilt and suffering they were reborn. They became believers. Thousands of them became believers.

Cut hearts were changed into burning hearts, and the church was born.

The message is the same in our epistle lesson for today (1 Peter 1:22). In that passage we learn that these early Christians loved one another "deeply from the heart."

Susan Andrews summarizes it this way in an article in the Christian Century. "Again and again in scripture, pounding hearts become burning hearts. And burning hearts become loving hearts.

And so the heart of God continues to beat."

## GOD IN THE STRANGER

The heart of God continues to beat. The Spirit of the risen Christ continues to meet us in a community cut to the heart by the reality of sin and failure. We are indeed (as someone once put it) a hospital for sinners.

And all us are sick.

But, the great physician does not leave us in our sin-sickness.

When broken people come together in the name of Christ, He is also with us.



He forgives us. He comforts us. He points us toward the kingdom that comes. And he challenges us to turn around and follow him.

God still comes as the stranger who somehow seems familiar.

I think of that passage from Matthews's gospel. It is the last judgment, and how are the people judged? They are judged by how they treated the incognito Jesus.

Jesus we learn is found in the least among us. When we treat others with compassion our eyes are opened. We learn that Jesus visited us in the stranger in need. (See Mathew 25:31-46)

Today's story teaches the same lesson. The lesson for today tells us that when they got to Emmaus the incognito Jesus acted like he was going on down the road.

But, the disciples asked this stranger to come and stay with them that night.

Think about that. If they hadn't asked this stranger to come and stay with them, they would have never seen the risen Christ.

How would you change if you really thought that the incognito Jesus traveled with you each day?

Jesus does indeed travel with us each day. Life is not just one thing after another. Life is a journey taken in faith.

The life of faith, Abraham taught us is searching in the wilderness for the Promised Land.

Life is trusting God even when our travels take us far from home, confident in the knowledge that God always goes with us come what may.

We, like those first disciples are slow to believe. As the hymn, "For all the Saints" puts it, "We feebly struggle." But, one day we will in "glory shine."

Until that great day when we join the church triumphant, we come each week to be fed by the Word of God and nourished by the community of faith.

We break bread together, and we remind each other of what it means to have hearts that burn and hearts that love.

Amen.