

We Had Hoped

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Luke 24: 13-35

Today's gospel begins with two disciples walking to Emmaus. Their hearts are heavy with sadness, loss, and disappointment. They had hoped Jesus, who was crucified, would be the one to redeem Israel! Yet the risen Christ walks with them and then opens their eyes in the breaking of the bread. Each Sunday our hearts burn within us as the scriptures are proclaimed and Christ appears to us as bread is broken and wine is poured. The story of Emmaus becomes the pattern of our usual weekly worship.

In a world where a lot of us are not traveling on a daily basis, we might feel less like we are on a long journey as the disciples are this week, walking over to the next town. Our reality might look more like being locked away as the disciples were in last week's gospel lesson, waiting for a sign of what to do next while we shelter in place. But we might be feeling like the disciples do in this week's gospel. If you, like me, feel like you are not quite sure what the future looks like, we are walking a similar road, my friend. Changed plans. Feeling lonely. Maybe even feeling some grief for the way we had hoped life would be for us right now.

Much like the disciples on their journey, we had hoped for more. We had hoped the tumor wasn't malignant. We had hoped our marriage would get easier. We had hoped the depression would lift. We had hoped to keep our jobs. We had hoped to carry the baby to term. We had hoped the pandemic would spare our family. We had hoped for a peaceful death. We had hoped to experience God's presence when we pray. We had hoped our faith would survive. In this Easter season, our hope cannot be answered by our own will, by pinning those hopes in the trust of our human systems alone. We have to look beyond ourselves and pin our hope on the cross. To see our hopes destroyed when the tomb is empty in the morning and realize that for the first time there is new hope in the world. Real hope. Hope that even death cannot destroy.

The disciples haven't figured out that their hope in what the Messiah would do on earth wasn't anything like they imagined. The teacher they staked their lives on, the Messiah they thought would change the world, has died the most humiliating and godless death imaginable, and his promises of a new kingdom have come to nothing. They need to tell their story of what they had hoped for in following Jesus, of what they risked following Jesus, to begin to understand the hopes we can know in the resurrected Christ.

I get where the disciples are coming from. Thinking their hopes are dashed. And maybe you do too. When I served as a Young Adult in Global Mission for a year in Manchester, England, following Jesus's call to serve my neighbor I didn't know what I was hoping for. All I knew is that I wanted to follow Jesus and be part of a Christian community where I mattered. I had hoped at first to be sent to South Africa

to serve, but I was called to England. I was heartbroken at first but found excitement in the possibilities of different placements. I had hoped to be sent somewhere where I could use my Biology undergrad degree to help care for the earth, but instead I was sent to a congregation that needed a parish assistant to keep the church running. I learned to love what I did in my community and cherish those relationships I built there to this day. And when it was time to come home, I had hoped to come back with a job ready to start a career as an environmentalist, but God called me eventually to serve God's church. I had hoped for a lot, but like the disciples the story was something different. It took me telling my story over and over again to compassionate strangers and friends to see the ways Jesus answered those calls of hope from me in Jesus' unexpected resurrection ways.

The disciples tell the story of what they had seen when following Jesus. Starting to process their experience of following and evangelize about a resurrected Lord they were not certain of to a compassionate stranger. This is still Easter Sunday for them, and they're not quite sure what to make of the women's witness of an empty tomb. These disciples were still living with the realities of the loss of a beloved teacher, and disappointment that he hadn't done what they expected him to do. They are telling their story in their grief, hearts heavy. Telling our stories of grief to Jesus by telling them to each other is a way of healing. And Jesus listens. He hears them out, giving them the gift of being heard. And then — when they're done — he tells the story back to them, and as he does so, the story changes. In his retelling, it becomes what it really always was — something far bigger, deeper, older than the travelers on the Emmaus road understood. "Here's what you're leaving out," Jesus seems to say. "Here's what you're missing."

I know we all have had moments of grief from the past 7 weeks of a changed world since the COVID-19. Grief of lost plans that had been carefully made months ago. Grief for a world and future so changed from what we had hoped it would be. Grief from not knowing that the last time you spoke with someone, were able to touch them, would be your last.

During these hard days of sheltering in place, hearing horrific stories of death and suffering, and fearing for our futures as individuals, families, and communities, it's difficult to trust in the transformative power of small things like telling our stories.

But the Emmaus story speaks to this power — the power of the small and the commonplace to reveal the divine. A bit of bread. A sip of wine. A common table. A shared meal. God shows up during a quiet evening walk on a backwater road. God is made known around our dinner tables. God reveals God's self when we take, bless, break, and give. God is present in the rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days.

What does this mean right now? It means God is in the text you send to the lonely neighbor you can't visit during quarantine. God appears in the Zoom gathering, the livestream worship service, the phone call, the greeting card. Jesus is the stranger you wave to across the street when you take a walk — both of you smiling beneath your protective masks. Jesus is the essential worker you thank for risking their

life whenever you venture out of your home. The sacred is in the conversation you have with your stir-crazy child, the technology you attempt to master so that you can talk to your friends across the distances, the loved one who challenges you to reframe the story of these days in the light of God's inexplicable provision and love. If the Emmaus story tells us anything, it tells us that the risen Christ is not confined in any way by the seeming smallness of our lives. Wherever and whenever we make room, Jesus comes.

“But we had hoped.” Yes, we had. Of course we had. So many things are different right now than we had hoped they’d be. And yet. The compassionate stranger who is the Savior still meets us on the lonely road. The guest who becomes our host still nourishes us with the word.

So keep walking. Keep telling the story. Keep honoring the stranger and the essential worker. Christ is risen. He is no less risen and present with us today as he was on the road to Emmaus. So look for him. Listen for him.