

Easter 3, Yr. A
April 26, 2020
Luke 24:13-35

This morning, I'd like us to focus our attention on HOPE, which is central to the reading about Emmaus, but which is equally central to our current situation, when we're called to hope but tempted to hopelessness.

There's a lot in that Emmaus story. There are those two disenchanting disciples, going home from Jerusalem. They are downhearted and confused to say nothing of the fact that they are suffering from devastated hopes. It's the afternoon of Easter day. Jesus is dead. They heard some strange stuff this morning from the women who said something about an empty tomb and angels, but that only served to add a layer of confusion to their sadness. So, the story goes, they're walking along when they are joined by a stranger who is apparently the only person who doesn't know what's happened in Jerusalem. They fill him in: Jesus, who was a prophet, mighty before God, accepted by the people, handed over to the Romans and crucified. And then there's that line that I'd like to concentrate on: WE HAD HOPED THAT HE WAS THE ONE TO REDEEM ISRAEL. We had hoped, but now those hopes have been crushed. I read somewhere that, challenged to write the saddest sentence in the fewest

words, Hemingway came up with this: For sale, baby shoes, never worn.

That's a picture of hopes crushed. That's also something all of us have experienced. So we can sympathize with these two disciples. But then the text says that the stranger who joined them begins a Bible study. Don't you wish you could have been in on that? In that conversation, Jesus helps them to understand that their idea of God redeeming Israel was too small. That idea, you may remember went something like this:

Beginning with the Exodus, with that rescue from slavery to the Pharaoh, the Israelites understood their covenant with God to follow a pattern. When pagan oppression would be at its worst, God would intervene and rescue his people. That was true with the exodus from Egypt or the return from exile. That idea of intervention was tied up with the idea of the Messiah and redemption would mean that the Temple would be rebuilt, and Israel would be liberated and evil and injustice would be conquered. But none of that had happened. In fact Jesus, the one on whom they had pinned their hopes, had been crucified which was considered a cursed death. That crucifixion was the final destruction of their hopes. That was the narrative, the story by which Jews, including Jesus' disciples, understood their world and their relationship to God.

But when Jesus explains the scriptures to them, he's rewriting that narrative. Your understanding of what's going on is too small, he tells them. The real meaning of death and resurrection is NOT the defeat of God's purposes for the world, but it's a necessary pathway to new life. There's a pattern here: a pattern of life emerging from death. You can read the entire Biblical story that way: out of original chaos, God created life; out of the slavery in Egypt, God gave the people freedom and a homeland, out of the exile would come a renewed people. So the story of redemption is not about God fixing it so Israel could beat up on its enemies, becoming the masters of the world. Instead, the story is how God will bring his life-saving promises for the world to birth through suffering. The cross is NOT one more example of evil winning, instead it's the exact opposite. It's God's way to defeat evil and death once and for all.

The story continues and says that with the breaking of bread, the disciples recognized Jesus. In a sense, they woke up. I read a story written by a minister who said that when his son was about 2 or 3, he would get up early – much earlier than his parents wanted him to and he would announce that by shouting, 'I WAKED UP! I WAKED UP! And perhaps that applies to us as well, to our waking up to the story of Christ and to where we fit in that story. And from that, where we can anchor our hopes.

I had a chance to talk to some family members and others this week, asking that basic question about hope. WHAT IS YOUR DEEPEST HOPE was how I phrased it. And the responses made me realize that our hopes lie across a spectrum. The first answer I got, from my 15 year old granddaughter was that she hoped to be satisfied with her life when she came to die. And there were others: my hope is to fix the health system, my hope is that my kids will live happy lives, my hope is that we will wake up to the gifts we've been given and the wonders that surround us so that we can live lives of gratitude. Others reflected the times we are in: hope that we will learn something from this pandemic, that we'll reflect on our lives and what needs to be changed, or that we can form a new society where everyone is open and honest, and making a good faith effort to be who they were created to be while not hurting others. Another said, "My sure and certain hope is in the resurrection." Another said, "Peace." And then, one that I think encapsulated all of those hopes: my hope is for the coming of the kingdom, which means that every last person on Earth will have enough, that those of us who have more than we need will learn to share, that every person can and will use his or her God-given gifts not just for personal benefit but for the common good, that we treasure one another and all God's people, that we honor God's creation and use it wisely.

I wish I had had the chance to talk about this with each of you. Perhaps we will have that chance but in the meantime, I invite you to think about it – what is your deepest hope?

There's a further thought about hope. I think hope can either be rather wimpy or it can be muscular. I think of wimpy hope as that kind of attitude that says, "Well, wouldn't it be nice... but that'll never happen. We all know that's just pie in the sky." Muscular hope, however, is something different. That's the kind of hope that moves into action. You'll remember from the reading, that when their hopes were renewed, the disciples didn't continue back to Emmaus but turned around and when back to Jerusalem, back into the fray, so to speak.

So, we too, have a choice here. Once we articulate our hope, the next question is what we intend to do about it. Writing about this, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks says, as we so rightly know, that the greatest danger in Western societies today is the sense of powerlessness, of problems that seem too great to solve. That can lead to a politics of despair which can lead to our withdrawal, or worse, to the kind of fear and anger that can be manipulated by those hungry for power. By those interested in constructing their own kingdom, not God's. Diana sent me something that she read that addresses this that comes from Micah and the Talmud:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Act justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Every good act, every healing gesture, lights a candle in a dark world. All of our flames together can begin to show that hope is not an illusion. Evil, injustice, oppression and cruelty do not have the final word. That’s the message of Easter.

I know you have heard it said before that the kingdom is both now – here and among us – and not yet, because it’s not fully realized. I’d like to finish by sharing a story with you that comes from the Zen tradition, where the language is different, but I think you will get the idea. It seems like a man who had practiced meditation for many years and who longed for enlightenment, received a message that there was a train to enlightenment and he should go down to the station and simply climb aboard. So to the station he went, but when the train came, it didn’t stop. He decided he had no choice but to wait and see if it came again the next day. It did, and each day after that, but it never stopped. But his hope survived and he stayed at the station. But one day he noticed all the things that needed doing around the station and as the years went by he found himself cleaning up the area, building a playground for the children of the neighborhood,

organizing clean-ups and new housing, planting flowers in the park. This went on for a long time and then, one day, the train stopped. He couldn't believe it, but he scrambled on. At last, he said, I will arrive at enlightenment. And then came the reply: And where do you think you have been this whole time?

Our prayer today surely must be that we wake up, that we look at the story the world gives us and realize it's not the story of Christ. And that, based on that understanding, we can articulate our deepest hopes and then find the energy and the courage to work towards their achievement.
Amen.