

Easter 3  
May 4, 2014  
Luke 24:13-35  
Emmaus: the transformation of "I had hoped"

As we get older, life gets more complicated. When you are young, life seems simpler, changes are easier. If you don't get along with your parents, move out. If your partner or roommate is no longer compatible, break up. If your boss is impossible to deal with, quit. As we age, the road gets rougher: you don't easily divorce a spouse, abandon your aging parents, or leave a job just short of retirement. Retirement, that goal to which we aspire most of our working life, holds new challenges of money and time management, physical and sometimes mental limitations which do not fit our vision of what those 'golden years' ought to be.

There is a tension between who you are, and what you feel you should be. "I had hoped," we might say, "that things would turn out differently." Of course, that tension applies to the young, as well, for all of us experience times of deep disappointment, loss or fear.

We like to hear about the future, to think in future tenses, to carry the conviction of hope that life is changing for the better. That we will become what we feel we should be.

Then, there are those times of deep disappointment, when crucial hopes collapse. Where do you turn when it feels as if your journey is at an end, but you know your life will go on?

There were two disciples on the road to Emmaus. One is Cleopas – not someone we have met before in the Scripture. Possibly, the unnamed companion was female, as Luke's Gospel stories typically pair male and female. As they walk along, discussing the events of the past three days, a stranger joins them, who seems not to know what has happened. They tell the stranger, "*we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel*" – the Messiah – but they killed him. The disciples are broken hearted, stuck in their Good Friday distress.

The events of the last three days do not fit their vision at all – they are blind-sided. They had hoped that this messiah would actually make a difference in the world. They tell the stranger about the empty tomb and the rumor the women have started, that Jesus is alive – and they dismiss this as idle gossip. None have seen him, they say. It is as if there was a momentary glimpse of hope in the empty tomb, and then – nothing. Empty. *We had hoped*, they might have said, *that he was indeed risen*. But there is only an empty tomb.

They cannot see well enough to go looking for him – Jesus finds them.

Oddly, they can't seem to see that it **is** Jesus who walks with them. The face of the living hope walking with them on this road to Emmaus is unrecognizable to them in their despair. We might

hear in that our own struggle to recognize blessings in our midst when we are grieving.

The stranger calls them 'foolish and slow to believe'. He retells the scripture's teachings revealing the Messiah. Then, as they approach Emmaus, he walks on ahead, leaving them free to continue without him, to continue in their isolation and fear. Their choice.

The two call to him and urgently ask him to stay, inviting the stranger to join them for a meal. There is a happy ending here, as the disciples recognize Jesus when he blesses the meal. Looking back, they realize that Jesus was present with them for the entire journey. The disciples run back to Jerusalem to tell the others what has happened. When they enter the room, they find that Simon Peter has also seen Jesus alive.

Hope is rekindled and the Church begins to take shape around the (risen) body of Christ.

On our Holy Lands trip, we visited one of the four sites identified as being the 'possible Emmaus'. Abu Gosh is a little over six miles from Jerusalem, and actually within the district of Jerusalem. It is an Arab town, with a 5<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine church, and the present site of the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest mosque in Israel. The Crusaders identification of the site as Biblical Emmaus is apparent from excavations, and in the catacombs. The church was taken over by the Muslims at some point. The very large painted fresco on the wall depicts people at a meal together. The faces are obliterated, sanded or white-washed out, in keeping with Muslim aniconism: the prohibition of images of God, the prophets and all humans.

Yet, looking at the fresco, the Christian observer can see that the faceless images are the disciples breaking bread with Jesus at Emmaus. Jesus, known in the breaking of the bread.

The Easter resurrection appearances have shape and form – the voice heard by Mary Magdalen at the tomb, wounds that Thomas can touch, the interpretation of Scripture, and the breaking of the bread. Filled with pain and disillusionment, perhaps cynicism, the disciples to whom Jesus appears do not easily allow their hopes to be rekindled.

Resurrection hope invites us to see the Messiah in a different way. The Messiah frees people from empire by helping them create and embody an extraordinary life. Resurrection hope is the life of the Holy Spirit. We are invited to practice resurrection by becoming God's change agents, radiating a new way of being, placing our faith and hope in God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Emmaus is a place we run to when we are giving up, a place of escape or forgetting. Emmaus is a place where deep desolation turns to the conviction of hope. Emmaus is a place where we recognize Jesus and invite him into our lives.

Emmaus is our Sunday presence in church: renewal at the Eucharist, when he offers himself and

we invite Jesus into our lives.

That we return to the Eucharist weekly reminds us of another reality. We cannot whitewash the loss of hope, the death, tragedy and grief which occur in the ordinary course of living. We know there will be more times when we find our lives washed up – emotionally, physically, financially, spiritually. There will be times when we are stuck in Good Friday, unable to see the tomb as other than empty. We come to Emmaus for renewal of hope.

The vision of hospitality in the Emmaus story is compelling. An encounter with a stranger.

Last week, I was at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Aberdeen to attend the priestly ordination of Sarah Monroe. Throughout her formation process, Sarah ministered to the homeless in the Boston area where she attended seminary; now her ministry is with the homeless of Aberdeen. She exemplifies the idea of church without walls, as she walks the streets of this economically depressed area, and gathers those sheltering under bridges.

I was waiting with other clergy for the procession into church. The Parish Hall was a sea of white tablecloths, lovely flowers; a buffet food table was being set. I noticed a man standing on the periphery, peering in. He was unshaven, wearing jeans that did not fit, his hat in his hands. He was wet from the heavy rain falling outside. I walked over to greet him, thinking he might be one of Sarah's guests.

He drew himself up and said proudly, *'I am not here for money'* ... as if expecting to be dismissed. *Could I have a cup of hot coffee? I spent last night on the street because I have run out of money... I have a place to stay tonight.* My first thought was, we are both strangers here—yet this is God's Church. *Of course* I responded, and invited him in. *'It looks like a party, I'll wait here.'* I insisted, *come in, sit down.*

As we walked across the room, I explained the service about to start. He approached a table, sat in a chair, being careful not to touch the table or the cloth. One of the women setting the buffet brought coffee over and asked if he would like something to eat, gesturing to what was obviously going to be abundant food. His eyes lit up. The woman went downstairs to the church's food kitchen.

As we waited, he warmed his hands on the cup of coffee, and told me his story. Laid off several months ago in Bellingham, he and his wife decided to come to Aberdeen when their money ran out. *Why Aberdeen? Did you think you would find work here?* I asked. *"I had hoped"*, he said. *'Aberdeen is where I was raised. My family is gone, but it just felt like this is where I needed to be.'* His wife was waiting outside, afraid to come into a church. When the woman returned with food on a china plate, I asked for more for his wife, and then we wrapped it all in paper napkins to take outside. When he left, we exchanged blessings, both thankful for our encounter.

Aberdeen was his Emmaus, his *'I had hoped'* place – where he came when he was without

hope, yet *hoping* to change things for the better. The Church's hospitality was not sharing a meal on a fancy table cloth and china plate, or the ordination liturgy about to happen, but the simple offer of buttered bread and a cup of hot coffee to go, and the invitation to stay if he wished.

As the service began, I discovered that the ordination Gospel reading chosen by my friend Rev. Sarah was the story from Luke, the road to Emmaus. Fourteen years ago, when my sister was dying of cancer, she chose the Emmaus reading for her memorial service.

Emmaus. The transformation of "I had hoped" into the rekindled hope of resurrection life.

Alleluia. Christ has risen.

Amen

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