

*The Long and Winding Road to Emmaus*

“We were hoping.” There’s a lot of feeling packed into those three little words. Hoping: that powerful state that lives in the hearts of those who long for something better. We can be fueled for a long time on hope. Hope is what makes life worth living. But the disciples on the road to Emmaus had said, “We *were* hoping.” That longing is in the past; hope is now gone.

How many times have we been there? In that emotional void that comes after feeling so optimistic about the future, but now facing the disappointment of unfulfilled dreams. After being certain that things will work out for the best, but now trying to adjust to the realization that they won’t. It’s an unpleasant place to be, as Cleopas and his companion discovered. “We were hoping that Jesus was the one who would set us free.” Maybe they’d been on the road into Jerusalem when Jesus had ridden in on that donkey; maybe they’d even waved palm branches in wild enthusiasm and unbridled hope. Now here they were, trudging out of Jerusalem, away from hope, into what? What can fill the void expressed in “We were hoping”?

The simplistic answer is: Easter. In these weeks of the Easter season, we have the stories of the resurrected, living Jesus appearing to devastated disciples and transforming their despair into renewed hope in possibilities not even previously imagined. In “Bible time” the void doesn’t last very long. Jesus dies, but three days later, he lives. The joy of the travelers on the road to Emmaus came on the very same night of that first Easter day.

These are wonderful stories, but we know that our time in the void between disappointment and renewed hope is hardly ever that short. We have to sit with the pain and discomfort of “we were hoping” for as long as it takes to reach the other side – and there’s no formula or proscribed time frame for the process. Or we could say that we walk on the road to Emmaus for as long as it takes us to get to where our eyes are opened and our hearts are warmed.

Now I’ve been to Emmaus. I once actually lived just down the road from the town in PA named after the one near Jerusalem. Wherever that one really is. Unlike Emmaus, PA no one is quite sure. There are at least four towns in Israel that claim to be the site of the Easter night story, but none of them can make a definitive and unchallenged claim - which once led the late biblical scholar Marcus Borg to conclude that Emmaus is both nowhere and everywhere. Emmaus is nowhere precisely because Emmaus is everywhere. So, surprise: it’s a metaphor! The road to Emmaus is the one on which we all walk in the space in-between.

The actual road may or may not have been seven miles, but seven is one of those biblical numbers that tell us that there’s more going on here than factual history. In reality the road may feel more like 70 or even 700 miles. I heard something similar at the Sufi retreat I attended in January. It was called “40 Days: the Alchemy of Tranquility.”

Again, 40 is one of those biblical numbers. Like 7, it implies sacredness, a perfect timing. But as the retreat leader explained, the length of the “40 days” might be 4 minutes or 40 years. It’s the process that is important, as well as our openness to what will happen within us on the journey.

I was back at Gettysburg Seminary last week for my 30<sup>th</sup> reunion. Maybe that’s why one of my fellow classmates came to mind. In the spring of my senior year, my neighbor down the hall from me in student housing, expressed her anger about the upcoming Easter holiday. Her mother had died just a month earlier and she was still grieving. She didn’t want to jump into the celebration of resurrection; she was still on the road to Emmaus. She might have said, “I had hoped to have my mother around for many more years.” Acknowledging in this way her experience of the space in-between didn’t take away her belief in resurrection; it simply named her experience.

I’m thinking today about the people who have gathered today for Jane Bolander’s memorial service. Even if you never met Jarie or Jane, you can imagine the heartbreak of her illness and death at such a young age. Jarie might have said today, “We had hoped for a long and happy life together.” His road to Emmaus will be a long and difficult one.

And it’s not just about death either. These two stories are not meant to take anything away from your stories, my stories, our stories – of the roads to Emmaus on which we’ve all walked. “We had hoped . . .” You can fill in the blank with hopes concerning your life, your family, for this church, for our country.

We had hoped that by now racism would no longer be an issue in our society. We had hoped humanity would have finally come together in resolve to heal our planet. We had hoped that misogyny would not be tolerated in the halls of power. We had hoped . . . for so much. But then our hopes were crushed. And here we are – as Willie Nelson sang – “on the road again.”

So now what? There doesn’t seem to be much in the way of good news here other than this is just a fact of life. Except there’s more to the story. It ends in Emmaus, but something happens along the way. The risen Christ shows up – not in a big show of power and glory, but in companionship on the journey, in listening to the travelers speak of their shattered hope, in allowing them to name their loss.

This is what we can do as we accompany others on their Emmaus road. Accompany and listen. And we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable in naming our own losses and allowing others to accompany and listen to us. No matter where we are in processing disappointment and loss, we are all on the road together.

Which brings me to the heart of the matter. We are all on the road together, but there is more than even our collective presence. We are also together as the presence of Christ in and to

one another. This presence is finally manifested to Cleopas and company in the breaking of the bread, and readers of Luke's gospel have seen from the beginning the allusion to the Communion meal. Glimpses of new hope, tiny sparks of life in broken hearts, the shimmering of promises of an open future – are somehow made known in this ritual of eating bread and drinking wine. Refreshment and strength for the on-going journey.

At a recent event hosted by the Jesus Seminar, one of the speakers had a different view. He wondered whether it was time for the Christian church to give up on Communion. My friend sitting next to me said she heard me gasp. Although I definitely got where he was coming from. He had two points. First was that the theology of participating in a blood sacrifice is untenable to progressive Christians. Which is true, but that's not the only theological understanding out there. We just have to do a better job of letting people know that this is a meal of love, not a reenactment of a ritual killing.

His second point was that the Communion table has been a barrier for some people to be fully included in the life of the church. We've put up rules and roadblocks to determine who can and cannot partake. Again I had to respectfully disagree that this was the way it has to be.

No matter how you believe Christ is present, in Holy Communion we enter into a mystery. This mystery is a space in which the limits of the road fall away and for just a moment we might experience just a glimpse of new hope, just a tiny spark of life, just the shimmer of a promise. Each Sunday when we say "We are the body of Christ" and "The Spirit of Christ is in us," we are acknowledging this wonder. It's the time of our greatest solidarity as a community – as we come together both to confess our losses and broken dreams and to receive nourishment to go out and make a better world.

That's Easter. It's not usually a quick and easy resolution, rather a slow and steady walk on the road to Emmaus on which we will find that the spirit of Christ is indeed with us – even when we're not feeling it or recognizing it. The journey from "We were hoping" to "Christ is risen" may be seven miles or seventy. But it doesn't matter. The process of resurrection is always happening, the road to transformation is always ongoing. We may not know where that original Emmaus was, but that doesn't matter either. Emmaus is nowhere, and that means that Emmaus is everywhere. In your heart and mine. And we are going there together.

Amen

LUKE 24:13-35

*Life is Eucharistic. Christ comes to us in formal celebrations of communion. Christ also comes to us whenever we share meals with open hearts. Christ comes in the hungry stomachs of the poor and our hungers for healing. We will discover Christ in walking with those who hunger for grace. We will find our own wholeness as we invite Christ to be our companion on the daily journeys of life.*

*It is written . . .*

That same day, two of the disciples were making their way to a village called Emmaus—which was about seven miles from Jerusalem - discussing all that had happened as they went. While they were discussing these things, Jesus approached and began to walk along with them, though they were kept from recognizing Jesus, who asked them, “What are you two discussing as you go your way?”

They stopped and looked sad. One of them, Cleopas by name, asked, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened these past few days?”

Jesus said to them, “What things?”

“About Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people - how our chief priests and leaders delivered him up to be condemned to death and crucified him. We were hoping that he was the One who would set Israel free. Besides all this, today - the third day since these things happened - some women of our group have just brought us some astonishing news. They were at the tomb before dawn and didn’t find the body; they returned and informed us that they had seen a vision of angels, who declared that Jesus was alive. Some of our number went to the tomb and found it to be just as the women said, but they didn’t find Jesus.”

Then Jesus said to them, “What little sense you have! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced! Didn’t the Messiah have to undergo all this to enter into glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted for them every passage of scripture which referred to the Messiah. By now they were near the village they were going to, and Jesus appeared to be going further. But they said eagerly, “Stay with us. It’s nearly evening—the day is practically over.” So the savior went in and stayed with them. After sitting down with them to eat, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, who immediately vanished from their sight.

They said to one another, “Weren’t our hearts burning inside us as this one talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” They got up immediately and returned to Jerusalem, where they found the Eleven and the rest of the company assembled. They were greeted with, “Christ has risen! It’s true! Jesus has appeared to Simon!” Then the travelers recounted what had happened on the road, and how they had come to know Jesus in the breaking of the

bread.