

Luke 24:13-35

Luke's narratives frequently take us on the road. A journey brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. A road is the narrative setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan. A road leads the prodigal back home to his father. Jesus sets his eyes toward Jerusalem and takes to the road for ten chapters; this is known among scholars as the travel narrative where we find some of the most distinctively Lukan contributions to the story of Jesus. The roads continue in the Book of Acts where, for instance, Paul encounters the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus. There is something about travel that evokes Luke's literary and theological imagination. There is something about roads, the way roads bring us together, the way roads can pose a danger to us, the way roads become a symbol of a faith always on the move.

It is poignant, then, that the narrative of these two disciples on the road to Emmaus takes us to the conclusion of Luke's Gospel. The story is a narrative wonder. Irony, misunderstanding, drama, a reveal: these are components of a powerful story. Furthermore, a number of Lukan themes are woven together in this narrative: table fellowship, hospitality, faithfulness, discipleship. The scene on this road foreshadows the future of Christ's church in the Lukan imagery. This will be a church on the move, sent out by a Jesus who walks alongside us even when we don't recognize him.

Our scene is set on the same day as the women's discovery of the empty tomb following the crucifixion. The two disciples, Cleopas and his unnamed companion are walking, leaving Jerusalem to make the seven-mile jaunt to Emmaus. Why are they leaving Jerusalem? Do they fear for their lives now that Jesus has been executed? We

don't really know. All Luke tells us is that they are grieved about their recent experience. They are talking to one another, hoping to make sense of the nonsensical, when Jesus himself walks alongside them and joins them on their journey.

Jesus could certainly be a little coy, couldn't he? Here are the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, all abuzz with their visit to Jerusalem and the spectacular rumours emerging from the Passover situation. We are told that they "were kept from recognizing him." By whom, or by what, we ask as we wonder? Is this divine intervention in order to set up the tale? Or are we supposed to read something into this, something along the lines of "they were just so caught up in their own concerns that they couldn't see Jesus right in front of them?" Were they so grieved by their experience and so sure that Jesus was gone that they simply didn't expect him? Did Jesus look different after the resurrection? Was his face transformed? Was Jesus wearing a mask with a goofy mustache? We just don't know, and Luke does not tell us.

Anyhow, Jesus saunters up and asks, quasi-innocently: "What'cha talking about, guys?" Which, of course, gives an excellent opening for the story to proceed and for Jesus to get in a few of his final theological licks before his impending ascension. After all, somebody has got to understand all of this. Peter and the gang back home weren't at all handling it so well at this point!

In a strikingly ironic moment, when Jesus asks these two disciples what they are discussing, they are incredulous. Who doesn't know what has been happening in Jerusalem these days? It was all over the news; it was a trending topic on Twitter!

Their dashed hopes are voiced: "... we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel..." Had hoped. We invested our hopes in this Jesus, but he was not whom we had hoped he would be. In response, Jesus outlines for them the meaning and significance of his own death, starting from Moses and the prophets. It was "necessary" that Jesus would suffer, die, rise, and be lifted up into "glory."

Our story leads us to consider a basic question. Where do we turn when things fall apart? Fall apart not only for us personally, but also for the world. What do we think of when the things we have trusted in, believed in, hoped in, seem to have failed us?

The men on the road to Emmaus are disheartened by the death of Jesus. They **had hoped** that he was the one who would redeem Israel. Despite the fact that they knew the story – they just had no idea what it really meant. It's a tale that is really a story that makes a promise to those reading the gospel then and now: in Christian worship we are encountered by the risen Christ and in Scripture, these most heartbreaking and realistic words, keep popping up: "But we had hoped ..."

"But we had hoped ..." So much is said in those four words, as they speak of a future that is not to be, a dream that created energy and enthusiasm but did not materialize, a promise that created faith that proved to be false. It speaks of a future that is closed off, now irrelevant, dead. And there are few things more tragic than a dead future. 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.

“But we had hoped ...” – heartbreaking words that can ring true. They are not the only truth, of course; there is much in this life that is beautiful, daring, confident, inspiring, and more, all of which deserves our gratitude. But there is also disappointment, heartbreak, and failure. And all too often we tend to gloss over this in church. Or if not gloss over it, at least feel the pressure to move by it too quickly toward some kind of resolution, fleeing the cross-like experiences of life for the promise of resurrection. And not only in church, but also in daily life.

A friend shares the news of a death of his sister, and we sympathize for a moment before changing the topic. Or a colleague shares her disappointment at not getting a promotion, and we remind her that at least she has a job. Or we see an acquaintance we know has just gone through a dreadful loss, and we avoid him or her altogether because we just don't know what to say. We don't mean to be callous or insensitive, we are just at such a loss with ... loss. We feel inadequate to the task of confronting the darkness of our lives and this world and so we flee to the light in denial.

In the church this penchant is almost pernicious. And perhaps that's somewhat understandable. We are, after all, people of the resurrection. And so when reading this story we often hurry to the burning hearts part of the narrative, celebrating with the disciples their encounter with the Risen Christ. But just as before – before there is resurrection – there is the cross, and – before there are burning hearts – there are broken ones.

Can we be a place that welcomes broken hearts? That sounds easier than it is because it's not at all about treating our broken hearts as a means to an end – it's about acknowledging the cross so that we can get on to the resurrection. We need to recognize that part and parcel of being human is being broken. And it is to these heartbroken disciples – in today's reading and in this Sunday's worship – that the Risen Christ comes, walking along with us on the road, astonished that we don't see as we ought, teaching us the Scriptures that we might understand, sharing his presence through bread and wine, and granting burning hearts, that transport us back into the world.

But it all starts with broken hearts. We need to allow people to admit their darkness or own their hurt. The ones who are not ready to do so won't be persuaded by us, and the ones who carry this with them daily, like a snail carries its shell, don't need to be convinced, only invited and allowed – invited and allowed to share their disappointment that the cancer returned, the addiction wasn't overcome, the beloved died, the lover betrayed, the child walked away, the job didn't materialize, the congregation disappointed, the family hurt instead of helped ... and so on and so on.

They only need to be invited and allowed to grieve a future that will never be ... in order that they may possibly hear and receive the future God has created and prepared for them ... when they are ready to hear ... and as they are able.

Though the men had begun to understand the connection between the crucified Jesus and the Risen Christ, they still did not make the connection between the Risen Christ and the person in their midst. Talking, speaking, reading, words alone did not make that happen. That was something that had to be experienced, and all mystical experiences

are in some ways beyond words.

The story takes one more twist. As they approach their destination, the two disciples notice that Jesus seems to be planning to keep walking. (Where was he headed? Again, Luke leaves us in the dark!) They exhort Jesus to stay with them. They offer hospitality to one whom they believe is a stranger. They offer to be hosts to this travelling companion and “new” friend.

But as soon as the table is set, Jesus upends the expected social roles. He becomes the host by blessing the bread and sharing it. Now, remember, they still don’t know that they are once again dining with Jesus; they don’t realize that their dashed hopes are restored in the resurrected body of this “stranger.”

Somehow, when Jesus played host at the meal in their home, the universe shifted. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

What follows is fascinating. First, the men were able to look back on their experience and see Christ in it. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” Word and sacrament, scripture and experience, work together to bring us into the presence of the Christ, and one is not complete without the other. They weave in and out; word explaining experience, worship and ritual both underscoring and heightening the meaning of the word.

So when Jesus does the most Jesus thing of all, everything changes. What do you think is the most characteristic activity of Jesus? When we imagine Jesus, what is he doing? For many, he is on the cross or – he may be preaching to a crowd or – he may be healing the sick with the touch of his hands or – he may be enthroned at the right hand of God.

For Luke, however, Jesus is most Jesus at an ordinary table, at an ordinary meal infused with significance because of the people gathered around the food. Jesus is there at this table and so are all the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus shared meals. But not only that! Also at this table are the many powerful people with whom Jesus also dined.

One of the most characteristic activities of Jesus' ministry in Luke is eating. He is accused early in the Gospel of being a glutton and a drunkard; worse, he eats with all the wrong people! So, it's instructive that it's not his teachings that open their eyes. It's not his presence. It's his sharing of bread with his friends. It's his blessing of food. In this sharing of bread at an ordinary table, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' transformative kingdom.

In Luke, eating is a radical act because it breaks down cultural boundaries. In Luke, the resurrected Jesus shares that bread once again with his followers. And in feeding them, Jesus opens their eyes, helping them see that Jesus was with them the whole time.

There's a lot of stuff we're still trying to figure out, ourselves. We, too, are "foolish... and slow of heart to believe." But Jesus is with us, nonetheless, whether we recognize him or not. In word and sacrament, the Christ makes himself known as we break the bread and

remember.

The promise to us today is that the Risen Christ does come to us in the midst of our dashed hopes and shattered dreams. The risen Christ comes to us in the Written Word, the Risen Christ comes to us in the Proclaimed Word, the Risen Christ comes to us in the Lived Word of worship and sacrament, the Risen Christ comes to us in our moments of hospitality and generosity with others, both friends and strangers. The Risen Christ comes to us, and never leaves us alone.

The plot of the walk to Emmaus scene epitomizes the plot of the whole Gospel of Luke. Jesus is our companion on the way, but we do not recognize him. The astounding tale of the women had not been enough to kindle the faith of these two men. Their recognition of Jesus came when he "took bread, blessed, and broke it." In that moment, recognition dawned. In that moment they had a change of heart: from being "slow of heart to believe" to having hearts that burned within them as he spoke to them on the road.

They feel compelled to witness, to share with others what has happened to them. They hustle back to Jerusalem to tell the others of their encounter with the risen Christ, of how "he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

So how do we walk the road to Emmaus? There is no doubt that the story directs us to the church, where we may encounter Jesus in the word and the sacraments. But not to "the church" that's equated with the institution and Sunday worship. We are directed instead to the church that meets a very ordinary world, a world marked by human loss and human hospitality.

Yes, the story resonates with a sense of the church and its mission and of the tremendous power of the word and the sacraments to connect us with the presence of God. But its image is of God and a church that walk alongside human confusion, human pain and a human loss of faith and hope. Emmaus invites us to expect God to find us. Emmaus challenges us to see that it isn't our unshakable faith and deep spirituality that connect us with the risen Christ, but our smallest gestures of hospitality and friendship.

What makes the story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. We can understand Jesus appearing to the remaining eleven disciples, to the faithful women who followed him, and even to Paul – all very practical appearances in terms of establishing the church and its mission. But Cleopas and his companion are nobodies who have no idea of what God might be doing. They could be any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road, the road each of us is on every day. This is what sets this story apart from other accounts of Jesus' Easter appearances. It teaches us how to see and what to look for on the everyday road we walk.

It teaches us that by offering hospitality to the stranger, by showing kindness to the alien and refugee, by sharing fellowship around this table and sharing in all the suffering in all corners of the world, we truly welcome Jesus as our guest. It is at these times and in these places of being taken and broken, blessed and given, that our eyes are on Christ and our hearts are on fire. Christ is risen! Christ is with us always!

Alleluia!!