

## **“Disappointment, Consolation, and Hope”**

**Luke 24:13–35**

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The story we have read from Luke 24 is one of my favorites in scripture. I suspect it is for many of you. It is such a rich story with compelling Gospel themes. Jesus is *on the road* when this encounter with early disciples occurs. So much happens on the road. There is eucharistic language as Jesus *takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and then gives it to them*. There is a range of emotions we can all identify with, vivid imagery, and this provoking question, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?” Have we not had that feeling? I remember hearing this story as a youth and it spoke to me then. Now that I have been to one possible location of the ancient Emmaus, a beautiful town, the story is even more compelling.

And yet, all of this having been said, there are parts of the story that bug me. The text says that when Jesus met Cleopas and the other disciple, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” We might surmise that their grief clouded their vision or that Jesus looked different in some way. But the text says their eyes “were kept” from recognizing him, a divine passive, as if God prevented them from seeing. It’s like Pharaoh’s heart “being hardened” and then Pharaoh being punished for hardheartedness. It doesn’t seem fair!

When Jesus asks the disciples what they have been talking about and they tell him how distraught they are and why, he says, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” He says it was predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer and die, but it wasn’t... I know this is Jesus talking, but it wasn’t. There were prophetic images of a suffering servant, but these images were not connected to the predictions of a Messiah until after Jesus’ death and resurrection. So, the disciples don’t need to be chastised.

And if these things are not enough, as soon as the disciples realize this is Jesus — when he takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to

them — as soon as they know it is him, poof, he disappears! Why doesn't he hang around for awhile so that they can talk with him, ask him questions, offer him comfort, express love? Does he really have to leave as soon as they recognize him? Does he have a pressing engagement?

These issues do not ruin the story for me, but they do bug me.

Yet my frustration at these points surely pales in comparison to the frustration of Cleopas and the other disciple. They are in grief, profound grief, they have lost a dear friend, one they looked up to more than any other. And as they tell this “stranger” all that has happened, they say, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” We might translate “set Israel free.” This was the traditional expectation for the Messiah, that he would liberate the nation. “We had hoped that he was the one...” they say, *had hoped... but we were wrong.*

There is more than grief in these words. There is disappointment, bitter disappointment. They went against their instinct and allowed their hopes to rise only to be let down in the worst way imaginable. He had suffered and died a horrible death. They note that some women who went to Jesus' tomb said the body was not there and some angelic figures said he was alive, but they don't know what to do with this information. It seems impossible, just wishful thinking, he is dead now. They expected better of Jesus. They are bitterly disappointed.

So are we at times whether we say it out-loud or not, whether we admit it to ourselves or not. Sometimes our disappointment is with a biblical story. For example, the Jesus who speaks to the Syrophenician woman harshly because she is a Gentile is downright embarrassing. More often, though, our disappointment is about our lives and world.

We know what kind of Messiah Jesus is, and thus we don't expect him to create immediately the beloved community, but that there is still so much injustice in the year 2023, so much racial prejudice and gender bias and downright meanness doesn't make sense, if he has brought God's realm near. We know we are not protected from all harm, Jesus certainly wasn't, but it seems like the best people suffer the most; surely Jesus could do something! We know the faithful are not guaranteed

worldly wealth and success any more than Jesus was, even though many teach and preach that they are, but can those who faithfully labor not expect some basic standard of living?

And there are many other things we have hoped for but not found — a life mate, meaningful work, children — and many good things and people we have lost. It isn't Jesus' fault, he doesn't cause our struggles, but could he not prevent some of them, or at least do something to help?

I think of an older couple whose wedding I officiated at many years ago. They had known each other in school growing up but had gone their separate ways. Each had been married for over forty years, each had lost a spouse, and now they had found each other again. They were in their seventies, but they were one of the giddiest couples I have ever united in marriage. After so much sadness, they knew joy again!

And then, within a year, he died. He was diagnosed with cancer a few months before his death, but he didn't tell anyone, including his new wife, until a couple weeks before he died. He thought he was protecting her. She knew something was wrong, but she didn't realize how wrong until it was almost too late. And by then, she was so angry with his secrecy that she almost couldn't see the grief that was underneath the anger. But she was not just angry with her second husband. She was angry with God and Jesus. What did she do to deserve this? Where was Jesus when she needed him?

There are times when Jesus disappoints us. We had thought that he was the one to save us. Maybe we were wrong.

But the story from Luke does not end with disappointment. Jesus does not remain dead. He rises to new life and he walks among his followers on the road to Emmaus. He may not be recognizable at first, but he is there, teaching his followers the meaning of scripture, the purpose of his death. And eventually he is known to them in the breaking of bread, and thus, they can reflect on the entire day and make sense of all they have experienced.

The message for us is that the God who was in Christ offers us something more than disappointment — consolation and hope. We may not see it at first. We may not recognize the presence of the Risen Christ

among us, teaching and healing. Perhaps only in the breaking of bread, or perhaps only after the fact, upon reflection, do we see that Jesus was with us, is with us. But the Risen Christ does walk among us, bringing companionship and hope.

Often we see Jesus in worship, especially during communion. Christ is always here, but sometimes we realize it at a deeper level of our being. I suspect this was the case at the communion service a part of our church shared last weekend in Black Mountain. I helped lead the retreat, but I was not there for communion because I was here preaching, but from what I have heard, it was a deeply meaningful experience, partly because it was in a different setting, partly because everyone shared the bread and the cup with each other. Who knows all the reasons? It just was special. The Risen Christ was recognized in the breaking of bread.

Sometimes we see Jesus in the ordinary places of everyday life, especially when we reach out to someone in need or someone reaches out to us. Thomas Troeger tells the story about an experience he had in school. He was away from his fiancée and was very sad about this. He was sitting on a stool in a bus station feeling depressed and lonely when an elderly woman engaged him in conversation and tried to console him. She said he would feel better if he ate something. So, she bought the last donut, broke it, gave it to him and departed for her bus. At this point Troeger's eyes were opened and he realized Christ had been there with him in the bus station. (*Lectioary Homiletics*, April/May, 2011, p. 51)

So it goes for us. The Risen Christ is revealed in the ordinary moments of life, often when compassion is extended. There are no lights in the heavens. There are no angel choruses. But in caring for one another, while sharing bread and wine or a doughnut, our eyes are opened and we see that Jesus is with us, and his presence is all we need to keep going.

We see Jesus in times of worship, especially communion, and in ordinary life, but many times we only realize this after the fact. Thus, reflection is needed. Taking time to look back enables us to see how God has been involved in our lives even when we didn't realize it, how God has been helping us when we thought we had been abandoned.

I think of the old story about a person walking on a beach and seeing two sets of footprints until in a difficult period, they see only one set. They express disappointment to God that they were alone, but God tells them that was the time when God carried them. The single set of footprints were God's.

The story may be trite, but the message never grows old. God carries us when we think we are alone. It's okay to feel disappointed, we feel what we feel, but God didn't let us down — God was and is with us, strengthening us, enabling us to keep moving on, no matter what.

Near the end of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, after many life-threatening experiences, Bilbo Baggins speaks these words (p. 273).

Roads go ever ever on,  
Over rock and under tree,  
By caves where never sun has shone,  
By streams that never find the sea;  
Over snow by winter sown,  
And through the merry flowers of June,  
Over grass and over stone,  
And under mountains in the moon.

Roads go ever ever on  
Under cloud and under star,  
Yet feet that wandering have gone  
Turn at last to home afar.  
Eyes that fire and sword have seen  
And horror in the halls of stone  
Look at last on meadows green  
And trees and hills they long have known.

Our roads go ever ever on, we experience many challenges along the way, but the Risen Christ is with us always, offering companionship and hope, leading us to meadows green, God's meadows, abundance in this life and a home with God in eternity. Thanks be to God!