

**"But We Had Hoped" – Luke 24:13-35 – April 30, 2017**

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Today's story casts the scene of two disciples traveling home to Emmaus after the Passover. They left Jerusalem downcast and discouraged. While on that dusty road, they came face to face with truth as they had never before experienced it. The two have had quite the experience these past few days in Jerusalem, beginning with the excitement and palm waving and Hosannas as Jesus came into the city a week earlier, and then concluding with the horrible crucifixion and death of the one they thought had come to set Israel free. Then earlier that morning, some of the women had come back from visiting the tomb. They came to the men, telling of their experience of seeing some angels at the empty tomb who claimed that Jesus was alive. Yet the story the women told was shrugged off as an idle tale.

The two disciples began the agonizing walk home. Their grief was still raw, and it was deep. And all the hope that they had placed in the promise of Messiah was gone. There was nowhere to go but home.

Writer and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner describes Emmaus as one of those places we go to distance ourselves from situations that have become unbearable. In the face of overwhelming conflict or distress, Emmaus is the handy escape route that we use to get away. Buechner writes, "Emmaus can be a trip to the movies just for the sake of seeing a movie or to a cocktail party just for the sake of the cocktails. Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car...or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that people have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends. Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life." (The Magnificent Defeat, p. 85)

Yet as they traveled down this road, consoling with one another over the tragedy that had occurred, they were suddenly joined by another traveler. Gospel writer Luke tells his readers that this traveler is in fact Jesus himself. But they are unable to recognize him. They cannot see who he really is.

So Jesus joins them and asks them what they have been discussing. With more than a hint of astonishment and with a great deal of sadness, Cleopas says to him rather directly, "Have you been living under a rock? Don't you know of the things that have been going on lately? It's pretty big news in Jerusalem." Jesus asks, "What things?" Cleopas has no problem spilling his heart to and sharing his hopes with this traveler. He tells how he had believed Jesus to be the great prophet, both mighty in his words and deeds, but something horrible happened, and Jesus was put to death by the religious leaders. Cleopas says, using the past tense of the verb, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." In that sentence, he affirms the magnitude of his grief, and, that for him, all hope is gone.

He then tells Jesus about what the women had said, that they had gone to the tomb and found it empty and had been greeted by angels who claimed that Jesus was alive. He even goes on to say, "Some who were with us went to the tomb to check it out. They found it empty, like the women had claimed, but they didn't see him." Ironic that Cleopas is looking him straight in the face, but he doesn't see Jesus either.

And then Jesus began to speak, explaining to them what was written about the Messiah in the scriptures from the books of Moses all the way through the writings of the prophets. Jesus told them, all they needed to know was right there, contained in the scripture, but they were unable to see the true meaning of them.

When the two disciples arrived at their home, Jesus began to walk off, but they invited him to stay with them. In another ironic turn of events, Jesus the guest turns into the host, as they sat down for the meal. At the table, he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and offers it to them. Sound familiar? The actions of Jesus and the words used here bring to mind the events of the Last Supper. It is not mere chance that this meal has a

sacramental quality to it. It is at this very moment that the eyes of the disciples are finally opened. Following Jesus' explanation of Scripture and then the breaking of bread, the truth is finally revealed. It is in this moment, in Word and in Sacrament, that their eyes were opened and they experienced the truth of the Risen Christ.

And then, Jesus disappears from their presence, and the two disciples excitedly exclaim, "Were not our hearts burning within us when he was opening the scriptures to us?" In retrospect, they realized that something had happened on the journey out on the road. While Jesus was speaking to them, their hearts began to burn as the truth was becoming revealed. The truth of Jesus Christ lit a fire in their hearts, which prepared them for truly seeing him for who he was while he was breaking the bread.

Presbyterian pastor Susan Andrews tells the story of a Jewish man married to a Christian woman and how he encountered the truth of Jesus Christ. She writes, "Michael was a bright and engaging Jew, married to a church member, and a faithful participant in our Bible study classes. There was rarely a question he could not answer or a theological idea that he could not explain. His God lived vibrantly but tensely in his mind. When Michael and Carol became the parents of a baby girl, they had to decide whether to baptize her. After much soul-searching, Michael agreed that Leigh Ann would be baptized, and he stood with his wife as she made the promises for their child.

"Michael's hunger for scripture continued. In fact, his chewing upon the word became almost frenetic I was not surprised when he finally came to see me. He was ready to be baptized. He was ready to follow the rabbi named Jesus. He was ready to believe. Why? Because in his intimate dance with scripture, in his intense study of the Gospels illumined by the Torah, Michael's heart had begun to burn within him -- and he had recognized the living God in the face of the risen Christ. In powerful ways, the Jesus described in the Bible had begun to get up off the pages and walk out into the world with him. Jesus had become Michael's traveling companion on the journey of his daily life."

It would be hard to understand what those disciples felt when they encountered Jesus on the Emmaus Road if we have not experienced something similar. But, if we have ever felt our own hearts burning in the light of the truth, then we know what happened that day when they encountered the Risen Lord.

So how do we ever experience this truth? If this story in Luke's gospel is the model, then the truth comes as a result of the experience of God's word and through the sacraments. We have the Holy Spirit with us to guide us in our understanding of and revealing the message of scripture. And then it is through the celebration of the sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper, that we as the community of faith participate in together and experience the real presence of Jesus Christ.

But the experience of encountering Jesus Christ can occur in other places. Even on the Emmaus Road. Remember, those two disciples were running away from Jerusalem in despair. They were deep in grief, and for them, all hope was lost. As I mentioned earlier, writer Frederick Buechner said, our Emmaus Road is anything that helps us escape or hide from the truth. Even in the midst of running away, we may find ourselves confronted by Jesus Christ. Yet even there, we may not recognize him at first, while he listens to us share our story of grief, as he joins us in our pain. It was later, when two disciples invited him into their home that their eyes were opened.

What is our response when we've experienced the truth of the Risen Christ? We do something about it. Truth is not something we keep to ourselves. It is something to be acted upon. God's truth demands a response. After their eyes were opened, even though it was late in the day, the two disciples didn't head off to sleep. They immediately went back out to the road and made the long journey back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what had occurred. They had encountered the Risen Christ, they had experienced the true message of the gospel, and they couldn't keep quiet about it. And neither should we.