

**Luke 24:13-35**

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (494)

"But we had hoped..." This might be the saddest passage in Scripture.

Maybe that's a stretch. There are a lot of sad passages in scripture. I mean, there's a whole book entitled "Lamentations." It's a short book, but it's a sad one.

But this one, maybe just the saddest phrase, and for it being so relatable, in today's parlance. Relatable: "But we had hoped..."

So much in life that started out as hope has played out otherwise. I look at the trajectory of history over the course of my lifetime. From fashion to "food science" to scientific innovation to political movements tried and fizzled or frayed or in flames: "But we had hoped..."

Humans are hope machines, I've heard it said. We live on hope. But sometimes our hope comes to:

One of these two disciples said it, though the story doesn't make it clear which one. These were two who had also been with them, two who until now hadn't merited naming and even now only one of whom did. Cleopas, someone never heard of before nor ever heard of since, and together heading to a village never mentioned in scripture except for here. The details of this story, which stubbornly refuse to be symbolically rich or suggestive of transcendent meaning, make the whole thing ring all the truer to me. They're not poetically significant. They're symbolic of nothing but are mere plain facts. Just so these two, Cleopas and the other one, simply a pair of the apparently many who were with them, many who were beyond the named twelve, and going to a place that was probably just where they'd come from before all this.

All this—because it was nearing evening on that first day, that first day we had two weeks ago, Resurrection day. Evening of that day, which means they'd had quite the week.

It had begun with what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as if he were a big deal, which to those to whom he was, he was. An unlikely redeemer, someone who rode in not on a stallion or a warhorse, but a donkey, a beast of burden, and someone lauded not with banners of purple and gold but with cut branches from obliging trees, someone forewent and followed not by soldiers and chariots, not trumpeted with actual trumpets, forewent rather by peasants and their modest hollering, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It was a homely display of victory, if even that. Because, victory over what? What actually had Jesus accomplished by this point?

A homely display of victory: maybe rather too much a contradiction in terms.

But if it was modest, even homely, it also might have been immersive and even felt massive to those gathered, as if they might actually change some things, as if this playing at an inversion of worldly power might actually bring shame to those who exercised worldly power. The kings, the emperors, their sycophantic [kiss-ass] courtiers and cabinets of advisors: that they might actually, for once in their lives, feel ashamed of their vanity, their brutality, their stupidity, their exploitation of the masses, their playing them for fools (playing us for fools). Because, the thing is, the one riding on the donkey had displayed real power over these last several months, several years. All those miracles? All those healings? He wasn't nothing. It's just he'd done such things for those who *were* nothing.

But by the end of the week he'd be as if nothing as well. Provocative enough, indeed powerful enough all week to get the attention, and the ire, of lots of authorities—religious, imperial—he argued with scribes, sadducees, Herodians, at last Pontius Pilate. But by the end of the week he was as if reduced again to the peasant that he was, but even then betrayed by his compatriot peasants: “Crucify him!” they declared. “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Was it emotional pique that had the whole city (it seemed) decide this? Or was out of something more humdrum? As if, well, someone's gonna die, it might as well be him...? (“Better than if it were to be me.”)

“But we had hoped...”

When I was teaching at Berkshire Country Day School, a student of mine died at her own hand. She was in my twelfth-grade English class. I taught part time, when the high school there was new and small, and also when (turns out) it was in its final years, an endeavor that never got off the ground. Turns out, Berkshire County didn't and doesn't need another high school, and certainly not another private high school. She did it (my student) coincidentally on Maundy Thursday and when we returned to school after that holiday break where once I'd had twelve students in my class now I had eleven.

I'm not making a religious case of those numbers.

I mention all this because I remember, when describing to a friend a few days later how desolate I was feeling about it all, my friend noticed that there was something of guilt in my telling. “It sounds like you think you did something wrong here,” and, kindly, she added, “You were her English teacher,” as if to put in better perspective the role I played in the girl's life.

“But I was there,” I remember saying. I’d been close enough to feel the blast, a part of a dynamic that had turned so destructive, even if a far distant part. She and her end and now her absence were sticking to me like the smell of smoke after a fire. I was there when everything was spinning out of control, sitting in a small classroom with her hours before she did it, and I was Cleopas, or more like the unnamed disciple, just someone who was there and now was bewildered and bereft: “But we had hoped...”

It would be too easy a thing to say their bewilderment, their bereftness were what blinded them as they were walking along. It would be easy to say their having been so close to the blast is what made them fail to see, fail to believe. And it would be easy then to moralize this, to say we ought not to trust what grief we might carry in life, what times when we had hoped but now we no longer do—to judge these things as essentially blinding.

As if bewilderment and bereftness are essentially blinding.

As if these states of having hoped but no longer hoping aren’t themselves also true.

Holy Saturday has its truth. That stultified Saturday between when Jesus had died and the morning when he was raised: this holds its own harrowing truth. That thirty-six hour period when the cross in our sanctuaries is shrouded in black: this time of ache and absence is also true.

“Oh God, I’m dying,” the character Jesus sings in the musical *Godspell*. (And I know: some would argue this cultural artefact, this gospel according to the 1970s, is too facile a rendering of the story of Jesus. But others say, “That musical is how I came to believe.” So...) “Oh God, I’m dying,” he sings over and again and each time more faintly, until a stage-whisper, “Oh God, I’m dead,” and then quite a long moment before dawns the quiet the chorus, “Long live God.” And eventually growing, “Long live God...” That pained moment, that shrouded cross that withholds its hope (“But we had hoped...”), that Holy Saturday where the usual holiness of the Sabbath holds its breath, that bewilderment and bereftment, “What the hell just happened? And why do I feel as if I’ve done something wrong, been a part of something that went terribly wrong?” is also true.

“They know not what they do,” Jesus said from the cross about no one in particular and about every single one of us.

True.

But what is more true, or more abidingly true, is the ordinary presence of Jesus, the risen one.

And, see, it's the ordinariness that might actually be what blinded them, or might also be what blinded them. The fact that he was dead, was indeed spectacularly and painfully and shamefully and undeniably dead; the fact that he'd been buried and the tomb had been (as tombs are) closed up and walked away from; the fact that, okay, some among them had said they'd seen him alive, or at least seen a vision of angels who said he was alive, which seems right because if something as out-of-this world was gonna happen as a dead peasant raised then it would be and indeed should be something a bunch of angels arrive to tell about. But this, this man on this road going to this village that literally had nothing to say of itself other than that Cleopas and the other one were likely from there: this is entirely too ordinary.

Blindingly ordinary.

Which is one of the funny things about the resurrection narratives, the sightings of the resurrected Christ which the gospel narratives go to the trouble to tell us about: they don't swear that Jesus showed up in significant places or to significant people or to do wondrous, astonishing, significant things. He just shows up, here, there, in an upper room, on a beach in Galilee, on a road to a village no one could care less about. The emperor's like, "Well, I didn't see him." And the chief priest's like, "Well, I didn't see him." And the king and all his courtiers are like, "Well, we didn't see him." But his friends, fishermen and carpenters and women who kept the world going, were like, "Well, we did." He showed up as one of us. So

where we had hoped  
we will once again hope.

And the victory, apparently, won't be spectacular. It will be ordinary, and it will be good. And the resurrection of life to life won't be something that peels the skin off your eyeballs and sets your hair on fire. It will be something that invites you to a table to have a sustaining meal as you come home.

Tobias is graduating this year, next month. He and his friend Karl, who was visiting during their spring break, were reflecting on what it feels like to be on the precipice of "adulthood." It's not what they'd expected. They thought adulthood would be awesome.

When they were young and imagining what it would feel like to be grown up, they imagined it as a glorious arrival, finding yourself in a place of power, impressive, accomplished, well appointed, if also commonplace power, something all adults enjoy. People listen to you when you're a grown-up. You can sign a piece of paper and it has a material effect. You can decide to do something and then do it and you don't even have to ask. They thought it would be an arrival and then an enjoyment of where you've arrived and all the impressive things you did to get there.

That's what they'd thought.

Now? "My life's not going to be great," Tobias said, and in such a way as was clear that he didn't want me to correct him.

Because, turns out, he was mostly okay with that. That your life can be yours: this is the blessing, this is the place whereupon Jesus might join you if you just keep watch, keep watch for where you had hoped and where you might hope anew.

Spring has come. It is rainy in its coming. And the grass is suddenly green and the cherry blossoms are suddenly pink. And it is raining. And it is good.

Thanks be to God.