

“Risking Hope”
Luke 24:13-35
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3rd Sunday in Easter
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We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped. Chances are you've faced that kind of disappointment before. We had hoped the college would have accepted him. We had hoped the election would have turned out differently. We had hoped the cancer would have been less aggressive. We had hoped the treatment would have worked. We had hoped he would have put down the bottle. We had hoped the marriage would have fixed itself. We had hoped.

Chances are you've faced that kind of disappointment before - like Cleopas and the unnamed disciple on their way to Emmaus. They had hoped Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. Free it from Rome. Save them from their troubles. Maybe that's why scholars can't find any actual geographical place named "Emmaus." Emmaus is the place you go to avoid standing still, looking sad. That destination you head to keep moving, keep putting one foot in front of the other. That place that's "anywhere but here." Most of us know that place. Maybe that's why the disciple traveling with Emmaus isn't named in the story. You could be that disciple, trudging alongside Cleopas, feeling sad, on the way to that place where you go to deal with loss and disappointment. We had hoped.

Emmaus is a comforting place, I think. Hope is risky. Hope sets you up for disappointment. Emmaus is the place where to go to lower expectations. So you tell yourself the relationship probably won't work out, or the job probably won't come through. You tell yourself that this administration probably *is* going to be as bad as you expect it to be, the nation probably won't get better. Emmaus can be a comforting place because as John Clees once said, "I can take the despair. It's the hope I can't take."¹

Maybe that is why when the Risen Christ does show up, the two disciples - the people most likely to recognize him - just can't see. It's hard to see hope when you are only expecting disappointment.

Meg Peery McGlaughlin, a preacher friend in DC recently brought to my attention the book, *Why We Ignore the Facts that Will Save Us*, written by father/daughter duo. Jack and Sara Gorman tackle confirmation bias. They study persistent beliefs in our culture which are not just demonstrably false, but also potentially deadly, such as the conviction that vaccines are hazardous.

"Immunization is one of the triumphs of modern medicine," the Gormans note. But no matter how many scientific studies conclude that vaccines are safe, and that there is no link between immunizations and autism, anti-vaxxers remain unmoved. What's going on with that? Why can't we see the truth that can save us? The Gormans cite research that shows that people experience genuine pleasure

¹ Thanks to the Rev. Rebecca Messman, a pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Herndon for pointing me to this quote and for additional insights peppered throughout this sermon.

—a rush of dopamine—when processing information that *supports* their already-held beliefs, even when those beliefs are wrong.

It feels good to stick to our guns even when we're wrong. It feels better to see a political opponent fail than to see him surprise us with beneficial policies. It feels good to watch our brand of cable TV reinforce the outrage we already know. It feels good to have our disappointment confirmed. Cleopas and the disciple knew Jesus was dead. They knew that the empire had won. They knew that Jesus' teachings had failed. It felt better to be confirmed in their disappointment than to hang onto risky hope.

And so they walk for miles without seeing hope right there beside them. I hope you're not surprised that Jesus is there and not because of some cheesy footprints in the sand poem. The God who is with us shouldn't be a surprise to most of us. This God who is closer than we think. That's what Jesus is all about in the Christian story. Are you suffering? This one knows suffering. Have you hit the bottom? This one knows the bottom. Facing death? This one's been there, too. Felt betrayed by the people you love? Check that off the list. The church has been trying to teach us that Jesus is there in our suffering, in our hopelessness, especially among those who know the injustice of empire, who know its crucifixions and other tools of fear. We shouldn't be surprised that where hope is lost, Jesus is probably nearby – like touchably close.

But bad theology is hard to get out of your system especially when that bad theology is another tool of empire. Theology that says, God helps those who help themselves. Theology that says, material wealth is an automatic sign of God's blessing. Theology that says if you're not winning, or not feeling good then God is probably not on your side. Even Jesus' close disciples have a hard time getting that kind of bad theology out of their system. Maybe they've heard it for so long that they get a dopamine rush when they have it confirmed.

Thankfully, they don't have to get their theology right-sized in order to see Jesus. They just have to pay attention to someone else on their journey. That's right. They don't have to get closer to God by crawling on their hands and knees through fire, or praying the Psalms from 1 to 150. They don't have to confess their sins for 3 hours each day or memorize scripture – none of the usual thing that we usually regard as “spiritual.” They just pay attention to someone else – to a stranger. Walk side by side for a little while. Take a risk and welcome someone else alongside. And there they find the hope that will save the world. Or hope finds them.

Paying attention to people you run into can rock your world. It can change your outlook, diminish your fear, open you up to God's presence in the other. Paying attention to someone else and inviting them to stay awhile – it opens you to hope.

Or it did for Cleopas and the other disciple, anyway. Not only did they see Jesus, but they went back to the place where he was executed. They did a 180 and went back to the place where truth tellers are silenced, where love-makers are snuffed out, where justice-seekers are shut down. They went back to the place where they had lost hope, ready to announce that everything had changed. They went back into the place where death had confirmed everything they believed about

the harshness of this world, confident that there was more to the story than they had imagined. They went back to Jerusalem.

Imagine if they hadn't invited Jesus in. The text says he was headed onto the next village. He wasn't going to tell them who he was.

Imagine if they had said, "The schedule's too full for conversation today." Imagine if they had said, "My work is so demanding that I don't ever have time for anyone who isn't on the calendar." Imagine if they had said, "I am too weary for anyone who I don't already know." They almost missed him. It's so easy for hope to keep right on walking if you don't ever take a risk to invite him to dinner.

But they didn't. I'm so glad they didn't.

And maybe there's a lesson there for people who had hoped. People who had hoped a change was gonna come. People who had hoped love would win. People had hoped that death wouldn't have the last word. People who live in times of fear. You don't always have to crawl on your hands and knees through the fire. You don't always have to work 10 times harder to force good onto the stage. Sometimes the best way to resist hate, or anxiety, or just the latest hurtful tweet, is to pay attention to people who enter your life. Listen to them. Invite them into your life and your losses. Invite them to share food at a table. Invite them to be real with you.

Because the testimony of Luke is that resurrection is going to happen. No amount of organized money or organized people can ever stop resurrection power. No empire, no administration, no nation, no people can shut down resurrection. Sure they will try. There will be more Pilates and Herods and Caesars and Pharaohs trotting out their crosses. Death is still on the march. But resurrections can't be shut down because they come from God.

The only question is whether you will want to see them or not. Whether you want to stare hope in the face when he's walking beside you or let him keep on walking to meet someone else. Whether you want to see what life after suffering looks like or whether you want to keep having your worst confirmed.

I hope you'll decide to make some room. I hope I'll decide to listen a little more. To tarry a little longer. I hope you'll relax a little, let the tension fall from your face. Uncross those arms. And meet Jesus in the world as close as a stranger, a nearby as your breath ready to meet you in a simple welcome.