

Based on Luke 24:13-35

Third Sunday of Easter

Now on that same day two of Jesus' disciples 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.

It is hard for us, I think, knowing the whole story of Jesus, to truly understand the sense of despair and defeat; the soul-crushing disappointment of Jesus' death to his followers. They imagined themselves on the cusp of a reimagined world, where all of their fears, worries, disappointments, and insults were undone to be replaced by something vaguely understood but definitely wonderful. It's as though they felt they held a winning lottery ticket, one of those billion-dollar Powerball winners only to find out their winning ticket is a fake.

They were crushed, all hope was lost and we can see that in these two followers of Jesus from this story. They were probably there when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, maybe they'd seen his miraculous healings or the way he'd boldly chased the vulturous money changers out of the Temple. Surely, they must have thought, Jesus' bold actions and fearless taunting of the aloof authorities was the precursor to a new society, a better society, and one where they were the winners, at last.

And maybe they witnessed the crowds ginned up by those same aloof authorities crying for Jesus to be crucified, saw the beaten and bloodied Jesus drag the instrument of his own death and torture across the city to Golgotha. Perhaps they even watched him draw his final breath, from a distance of course because they were afraid. Maybe they were ashamed of their own passivity in the face of Roman power. They have definitely given up and are on their way back to whatever sad little village they had come from; in a hurry to put behind them the death of their dreams.

And then they encounter a stranger who seems oblivious to the whole soul-destroying episode, and yet with nothing left to lose they welcome him into their company. And this stranger isn't hopeless like them; on the contrary he is brimming with hope and begins to tell them of how they have misunderstood all that has happened. And in doing so their spirits are lifted so much that by the time they reach Emmaus, they invite him to join them for dinner. And just as they sit down and the bread is broken to begin the meal, they realize that this stranger among them is Jesus himself! That the crazy, completely unbelievable reports of Mary Magdalene and the other women are true!

Jesus lives! Hope lives! And these two, who were despairing and without hope have been re-energized and immediately get up and return to Jerusalem despite the lateness of the day.

One of the gifts of the church is the sacrament of communion, where we, just like those two in Emmaus, might break bread with the living Jesus and discover his presence among us. Communion is not just some old rite, it is not merely a commemoration of or parroting of something someone did long ago but it is a powerful reminder of God's love and commitment to be with us always. Of course, it is also important that we encounter God in this way in community.

God's vision for us isn't about our isolated and individual selves. Rather, it is a vision of our connectedness. Jesus didn't come to save me or you; Jesus came to save *us*. And our participation in the sacrament is meant to encourage us and to lift us hope, to fill us with hope and prepare us to get up, just like in Emmaus, and return to the world to continue the work that Jesus himself began.