

May 4 - We Had Hoped

Luke 24:13-35

The story of the two disciples walking to the town of Emmaus on the evening of the resurrection and encountering Jesus should be a familiar story for us. I know it is one I have read many times. The problem with such a familiar story is that it is easy to read it with only half of your brain engaged. You say the words but you don't really ponder what they mean because you already know your answers to the meaning of this event. Imagine my surprise as I was preparing this sermon when I read a commentary that caused me to go back and read, really read anew this story. It focuses on verse 21 where Cleopas, in conversation with Jesus, but not knowing it was him, says, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

I was challenged to again think about that phrase, "We had hoped." Think about what it means in relationship to crushed hopes and dreams. I have heard families use that phrase when they were packing up the things they had brought with them to the ICU. "We had hoped ...," they say, and then they go home alone. I have heard families use this phrase when addictions return in the child's life or jobs goes away.

We tend to skip over these moments of deep disappointment, when only a painfully imperfect verb tense will express what needs to be said. We like to hear future tenses. We like it when families say that everything will be okay, that they will go on, that everything will soon be back to normal. We like to talk about how the sun will rise tomorrow. We want to move past the grief and disappointment of the disciples before the resurrection and, here on the road, after that event and get to the glorious discoveries of Christ risen.

But in this unguarded moment, the walking disciples give voice to a discovery that every adult shares: very often, often when it matters most, we find ourselves speaking of matters of hope (and faith) in the imperfect tense: we had hoped ... We have confidence that we will ultimately pull ourselves together, rely on our faith and face the future with conviction but we, like Cleopas, have those moments of confounding disappointments and his words are ours. This is one of the things I love about the

gospels: they know what we sometimes don't dare to say. Some of you sitting here today will recognize the words, "we had hoped" as a true statement of your current situation or you recall a time when you thought or voiced those words and perhaps have not yet fully processed what happened. What does our faith say to us when all we can say is, "We had hoped?"

We rarely, in church, acknowledge the reality of disappointment. We want to move on to something more hopeful. Too often we use disappointment as a cheap set-up for the knockout punch of the gospel. We say yes there was disappointment but quickly go on to say that the resurrection easily and automatically overcomes all disappointment. That leaves people feeling like the preacher doesn't understand their profound pain and loss. It can leave them feeling that it is somehow or other wrong to feel this sense of disappointment and so they push it down emotionally, put on a happy face, and tell everyone they are doing fine.

In the story of Emmaus we tend to focus on the joy at the end of the scene. It is real. Death and resurrection do indeed fit into a long-established pattern of the way God works in a world as unrelentingly real as this one is. We tend to focus on their knowing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. We do everything but talk about disappointment. But truthful preaching on this text requires an honest recognition of the reality of deep disappointment.

The truth is that "we had hoped ..." Maybe we still do. We all carry with us some expectations, dreams and desires. For the disciples, in hearing Jesus they had hoped he would be the messiah. For people in the waiting room at the hospital they had hoped that the doctors would save their loved one. For Parents or grandparents they had hoped that their child or grandchild would not move back into patterns of addiction. For people of faith they had hoped their child or grandchild would become active or stay active in a church.

The truth is that sometimes those hopes have not been fulfilled. The bitter taste of disappointment has been in our mouths. We don't want to hear from well-meaning

folk, "Have faith, tomorrow will be better." Even if that's true, we are disappointed today and we want someone, especially God to acknowledge that fact.

The truth is that God is with us in our times of disappointment, not scolding us but with us encouraging us to see how God is at work. This was Jesus' response to Cleopas. He listened and then opened the scriptures to them to help them see that God was in the midst of what they were experiencing. It says that as they heard this their hearts began to burn within them. This is the thing to remember. God hears our disappointment, comes along side us, walks with us during that time and encourages us. We don't hear, snap out of it, or just have faith, but instead the one who is Holy is presence during our struggles. This reminder should help us when we feel the pain of disappointment.

The truth is that, given time and love, we will hope again. We will have new dreams and visions. Resurrections will happen but maybe not today or for many days. God gets it and understands. When we share our disappointments with God we will find love and our hearts will burn with that holy love and someday we too might run with joy with new life.

In thinking about this I was reminded of a young couple, he was an active part of our church and she was becoming active after their marriage. They had been married just over a year when she died suddenly the result of a blood clot happening after a fall. As I talked with him I heard a lot of we had hoped words. He had hoped to have a family with her. He had hoped to grow old with her. Instead he, not even 25, was burying her. At that moment he didn't want to hear anything about being young and his life ahead of him. Future talk would have only increased the pain and distanced him from those who cared. Instead I and his parents just walked beside him. We listened, acknowledged his pain and subtly reminded him God was with him. This reminder that God heard his disappointments and his pain were part of his healing process. And what we knew but he could not bear to hear happened. After some time the searing wound of loss healed enough that he could love again. He is now married and has a son. Yes, he now experiences the joy of possibilities and has remained strong in his faith because people

allowed him to deal with his disappointment in his way and support him waiting for him to feel the warmth and hope of God.

So when you have one of those we had hoped kind of moments or someone around you has them, give it to God. Don't be in too big of a hurry to try and make the pain go away in another's life by pointing to the future. Be willing to reject the good intentions but misguided words some might share with you and instead hear that God is with you. God will walk beside you or another in your time of discouragement. But God won't just leave you there. In God's loving presence you will hear that God loves you and can redeem even the worst of situations and when you are ready God will reveal a new future to you or another which they will then receive with joy and expectation. This is our hope and faith. We may be discouraged but God embraces our pain and leads us to life.