

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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We Had Hoped ...

*Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, May 4, 2014
The Third Sunday of Easter—Based on Luke 24: 13-35*

Despite our relapse into winter last week, I'm starting to believe spring really is here. On my weekend walk in Central Park, I found spring colorfully unfolding—grass greening, trees flowering and all kinds of flowers blooming gloriously. Even the weeds are blooming, with bright yellow dandelion flowers everywhere.

It's hard to believe Easter Day was two weeks ago, or only two weeks ago, depending on your perspective. Especially when we read this story from Luke's gospel today. The Road to Emmaus. One of my favorites. It's a little jarring to realize this story takes place late on the first day of the week ... which means Easter afternoon. So we need to re-wind a bit.

Easter Day is such a spiritual high for us, a kind of falling in love, as Buddy said last week. And now we have this story that begins in such a place of utter dejection and despair. I've studied this story many times. You may have heard the story many times. This past week as I wrestled with the text, the words that leapt out at me were: "We had hoped ..." We had hoped.

These two followers of Jesus were walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles away. Not far, about the same distance as from midtown to Hoboken. They were discussing all that had happened in the past three days: Jesus' last supper, his arrest, crucifixion, the tomb found empty, and the women's report of angels telling them Jesus was alive, "an idle tale" that nobody believed.

But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped. These two are walking, likely returning back home, to Emmaus. As they walk, they're discussing the events of those last days, not in a chit-chatty way, but carefully, dissecting them from every angle. Searching for answers. How could their hopes and dreams have turned to ashes?

We had hoped. The language of broken hearts. We hear it as the family packs up the few belongings from the ICU and goes home alone. We hear it as a relationship is declared dead and the dismantling begins. We hear it as the plum job turns out ... not to be.

We've heard those words. We've likely said them ourselves. We've been there. The American writer and theologian Fred Buechner says, "Emmaus is where we go, where these two went, to

try to forget about Jesus and the great failure of his life.” [from *The Magnificent Defeat*, quoted in *Proclamation 2: Easter, Series A* by Vawter and Carl, p. 34]

Where is your Emmaus? Where do you go when all hopes are dashed, when you are so deeply, deeply disappointed that it is impossible to speak in the future tense?

It’s here, in this place of deepest despair, the risen Jesus appears. He appears as a stranger and enters into the conversation. Given all that’s happened, how physically close they still are to Jerusalem, and how everyone connected with Jesus has run away in fear that they’ll be killed, too, I find it remarkable that these two people on the road enter into conversation with a stranger and reveal themselves to be connected with Jesus. We’d call that risky behavior.

When they reach Emmaus a short time later, and a very important conversation later, these two people—Cleopas and the other, whom some scholars believe to be Mrs. Cleopas—invite the stranger to stay with them. They extend hospitality to this stranger, and he accepts their hospitality. In an unusual reversal, Jesus becomes the host as he takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread. In those actions, the two recognize the risen Jesus. And just as suddenly the risen Jesus vanishes from their sight.

The two rush back, late at night to Jerusalem (more risky behavior), only to find that the risen Jesus has also appeared to Simon (Peter)—likely in Peter’s time of deepest disappointment in the way things have turned out, in his deepest disappointment in himself. Hope has risen from the ashes.

Which is not to say that life suddenly got easy, that everything turned out perfectly from there, or that everyone lived happily ever after. We know that life is more real than that. Luke’s audience knew that, too.

It was my privilege to be this week with a group of people who have been doing the intentional work of grieving the loss of someone very close to them. When I first met them a month ago, each one knew only too painfully what it was for hope to turn to ashes. Their stories were of death, and their verbs tended to be past tense. I didn’t hear anything about going forward. They had hoped.

This week, when I met with them, I was surprised—and to be honest, awed—to hear the word “life” used occasionally. Tears were still there, still doing their job of healing. I heard the future tense used more than occasionally. I heard continued honest struggle. I heard courage. I heard hope, hope that had risen from the ashes of despair.

Our gospels contain multiple stories of the risen Jesus appearing to those who had known him. We know that those stories are not historical fact, recorded word for word by court reporters or even an iPhone. I can’t explain exactly how those appearances happened, nor can anyone as far as I know. And yet, when I read of the risen Christ’s presence, when I know that in my blood and my bones, I am reminded that “truth is too large to be contained by facts.”

The risen Christ is revealed through community, through offering and accepting hospitality. Hospitality of heart and spirit, offered through the honest telling of our own stories, and offered through listening—really listening, with respect—to the other’s story.

The cover story of today’s NY Times Magazine is about young people from two very different schools: Fieldston and University Heights. Both schools are in the Bronx, only six physical miles apart, but worlds apart socially and economically. Students from each school were paired to listen to each other’s stories, and then tell each other’s stories. They entrusted their stories to each other, and took great care with them. One said after hearing and then telling his student partner’s

story, “[His story] was so important to him. And now it was kind of my story, too. So it was really important to me to get it right.” Eyes were opened. Hearts were opened.

The risen Christ is revealed through the hospitality of breaking bread together, as we’ll do in just a few minutes, or through sharing a cup of coffee, or wine and cheese, or a bowl of ripe spring strawberries. This afternoon our Youth Confirmation class will have lunch with guests from our Soup Kitchen. The Soup Kitchen guests will prepare the lunch and serve it to the Youth. Then they will break bread together and listen to each others’ stories. What may be revealed during that time of community?

The risen Christ is revealed through the telling of the story (not just our own stories, but the big story) and the interpretation of scriptures. That’s what we do each time we gather for worship, what we’re doing now. St. Bart’s has two Bible Study groups that meet weekly to tell the story and wrestle together with the interpretation of scriptures. There is much to be said for reading and studying the Bible on your own. I have found it an even richer experience to study the Bible in a group, in community.

Each time we gather at this holy table to share wine and bread that is taken, blessed, broken and given, we believe that somehow the risen Christ is present among us.

Which is not to say that we always recognize the risen Christ. We may hear the scriptures and take communion, even go to Bible Study, week after week with seemingly no effect. Then one day our heart burns, maybe our eyes fill with tears, and something in us changes.

Whenever the risen Christ is revealed, God is opening our eyes and our hearts. When God opens our eyes and our hearts, God is drawing us in some way closer to each other (each other in the largest sense) and closer to God.

When we draw closer to each other and closer to God, then I think the world tilts that much more toward love and justice and hope.

May our hearts burn within us. May our eyes be opened.

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