

Easter 3  
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Losing hope can be debilitating.

Luke tells us that it is two days after Easter when Cleopas and another of Jesus' disciples are traveling along the road to Emmaus. They are talking to each other about what had happened. Hadn't they had such high hope that Jesus was indeed the Messiah they longed for. Being realistic, he was a wonderful teacher, a worker of miracles, certainly an evangelist for God but maybe expecting him to be the deliverer of Israel was putting too much on him. Now they were dismayed by stories about the empty tomb but they were not real sure what to make of the stories.

Deep in conversation they are joined on their journey by Jesus himself. However "their eyes were kept from recognizing him," a situation similar to Mary Magdalene in the garden. Jesus asks what they are talking about. They are amazed that this stranger has no idea what has transpired the last few days in Jerusalem. Cleopas begins to tell this stranger about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed. The chief priests and elders of the temple handed him over to the Roman authorities who had him crucified. They had hoped this Jesus was the one to liberate Israel and now it seemed their hope had been in vain.

Three days had passed since the death of Jesus. They heard stories of his tomb being empty and angels appearing to some women but you never know if you should believe such tales. Some of his disciples said they believed Jesus was risen but no one had actually seen Jesus.

Jesus responds to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have declared.....Did the prophets not foretell that it was necessary for the Messiah to undergo these things and then be glorified?" Jesus begins with the story of Moses and the prophets as he interprets for them all the Scripture says about himself.

It is evening as they draw near to the village so the two followers ask Jesus to stay with them. Jesus walked ahead as if to go on but they urged him strongly to join them. So, Jesus stayed. When they had gathered for the evening meal Jesus acted as host. He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and

gives it to them, in words recalling the Last Supper and the feeding of the five thousand. Immediately, their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus for who he was. Just as soon as they came to this realization, Jesus was gone, his body no longer limited by time or space.

Turning to each other in amazement they remark how their hearts were set on fire by his opening of the Scripture to them. Only in the light of the Resurrection are God's purposes for the creation fully revealed. Jesus is the one who teaches this understanding of Scripture. Jesus is the one to reveals himself in the breaking of the bread. Both word and worship in this instance point to Jesus. The two immediately return to Jerusalem to declare to Jesus' disciples, "The Lord is risen indeed."

Have you ever backed a cause that you believed could really make a difference? In the current political campaign season there are people changing parties and getting excited about candidates they believe can bring about change, make a difference. When that cause or that candidate proves not to be able to deliver the change you hoped for, when change does not seem to make a difference have you ever known the feeling behind the words. "But we had hoped."

These followers of Jesus had put everything into the Jesus Movement. They had listened to what Jesus said and believed that he could make a difference. Hope had been restored for them in a transforming moment. After listening to Jesus' amazing interpretation of the Scriptures it was in the breaking of the bread that they knew. Then, Luke tells us, their eyes were opened and their lives were changed forever.

That is what an encounter with the Risen Lord can do. Whether in the spoken word or in the visible act of sharing communion, Christ meets us as we trudge along the road of lost hope and shattered dreams. Somehow things become redefined, reinterpreted for us and our fears turned to faith, lost hope focused on visions of the future.

On a cool spring afternoon in a coastal town of North Carolina I walked over to visit Thelma and share communion. I was new at this calling to serve others as their pastor; still feeling my way and wondering if this was the right calling for me. The people of parish were arguing over the latest prayer book change. The Vestry could barely afford my salary much less pay the bills required to keep the church building heated, cooled and maintained.

Parish members talked about wanting activities for their children but no matter what I did their children had too many conflicting activities to be involved in what we were doing at the church. I had lost hope.

Thelma had at one time been a very active member in the parish. She would help prepare the Sunday bulletin on one of those old manual typewriters and then print the bulletin on a mimeograph machine. She helped plant and tend the flower garden in front of the church. Those days were long gone for Thelma as she lay in her bed looking up at the ceiling and listening to the constant drone of the television across the room. Thelma never seemed to move much, never spoke and often did not even acknowledge my presence.

Her husband, Bill, insisted it was important that Thelma had weekly communion. So, there I was communion kit in hand.

I sat down and made small talk for a few minutes. Then I set up my communion kit on the tray table Bill supplied. It was then that I realized I forgot my prayer book. I thought maybe I would ask Bill for a Bible, say the Lord's Prayer and try to recall the words of Institution from memory. I was not sure of myself and did not want to do it wrong. So, I went to find Bill in the front room reading his paper. I asked if he had a prayer book. He had an old one somewhere on the bookcase but he did not have the latest garbage the Episcopal Church printed. I took an old prayer book and returned to Thelma's bedside.

Slowly I made my way through the "thees," "thous," and "shouldest." Somewhere between the psalm and confession I realized Thelma was saying the words with me. I looked over and saw Thelma's eyes fixed on me, a smile seemed to form in the corners of her mouth. Realizing what was happening I turned to the longer form and prayed the entire Prayer of Institution. This was the service Thelma knew. These were the words that connected her to the community of faith and to God. In the words spoken and the bread broken she came alive again. That afternoon the risen Jesus transformed my theological education into a living reality. As I made my way through a liturgy we no longer used, shared a piece of tasteless bread and warm wine I knew Christ was in that room. My heart burned within me and my hope was restored.

All of us have moments when we lose hope. All of us face disappointments either in ourselves or others. All of us wonder at times about the world we live in and

question the presence of God. All of us need to hear the Word which tells us there is purpose to the creation and all of us do matter. All of us need to be connected and supported by others who share in the communion of our Risen Lord. Which brings me back to hope and the story of Emmaus. Hope reminds us, God is a living presence in the world.

That is what makes the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus so amazing to me. I can understand Jesus resurrection appearance to his disciples, to the faithful women who came to give him a proper burial, even to someone like Paul. But Cleopas and his companions are just ordinary people. They could be any one of us. They are just traveling an ordinary road feeling disappointed and confused. Emmaus invites us to expect God to find us in these moments. Emmaus challenges us to see it is not our unshakable faith or deep spirituality that connects us to God, it is in the smallest gesture of sharing, companionship and hospitality that we see our Risen Lord.