

April 26, 2020
Luke 24:13-35

The Third Sunday of Easter
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

Blinded by Hope

Our gospel reading for today is one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. And it was made even more of a favorite last year when I shared it with the First Communion class.

Last year's First Communion class had some kids who were not members of Emmanuel and who had not had a very extensive church upbringing in any church, which means that some of them, had never heard some of the stories that we talked about during their First Communion experience. It was fun to me to see the stories that we were sharing through their eyes as some of them heard them for the first time.

Sometimes those of us who have been at this for a long time can hear a Bible story and think, "Oh, I've heard this one before," and then, because we imagine ourselves so familiar with it, we miss the wonder of what it actually says. That's didn't happen with these kids, though.

We were sitting on the floor in a circle when we encountered this Road to Emmaus story in our First Communion class and I was kind of reading and kind of telling it to them. When we got to the part of the story where Jesus was made known to the disciples in the breaking of the bread they actually gasped. They hadn't known that it was coming. They didn't know that the breaking of the bread could make Jesus' presence apparent.

They had questions after we shared the story and we talked about it for a while. But their main question was, "Why couldn't the disciples recognize Jesus on the road; when he was walking with them and talking with them and sharing scripture with them?"

Like I said, this is one of my favorite gospel readings, but I wasn't sure how to preach about it today. Because I have always preached about it, in mostly the same way. You see, the story of the Road to Emmaus forms the pattern of our worship service, and it does for almost all Lutheran and almost all Christians who follow a liturgical pattern of worship.

The Road to Emmaus story begins with two disciples on a road, lamenting that things are not the way that they want them to be.

Our Sunday worship normally begins with confession, acknowledging the ways in which we are complicit in the world and in our lives not being what they want them to be. Our worship often continues with some kind of Kyrie, or other prayer for ourselves and for the world, asking God to be present and to have mercy.

The Emmaus story continues with Jesus coming to those two disciples and talking with them, hearing their story and then opening the story of scripture to them.

Our worship continues with scripture read and preached, where we believe that the Holy Spirit comes to us, to help us to understand what the prophets, and ancestors, and apostles have taught us. And if things go well, our hearts burn within us as the scriptures are opened to us.

Finally, the Emmaus story ends with the disciples sharing a meal with the stranger and finding that the stranger is Jesus, as he is revealed to them in the breaking of the bread.

For, us, in worship, after we have encountered Jesus through the word, proclaimed and preached, we have the true presence of Christ among us confirmed in the breaking of the bread, as we receive Holy Communion, and recognize that we, too, have seen the Lord, that the risen Christ has been in our presence and that we are not alone.

Most years, this is an easy story to preach about. It is a story that we celebrate every week in the pattern of our worship, even though we don't explicitly tell this story every week.

But not now. A virus that has disrupted our ability to work, our ability to travel, our ability to make a casual trip to a store, our ability to see family and friends, our ability to celebrate holidays and birthdays and anniversaries in what we would call a normal way, our ability to celebrate milestones and rites of passage, a virus that has even disrupted our rituals concerning grief and death, has also disrupted the pattern of our worship and we are living in a place where all we can say is, "We had hoped..."

I am well aware that I have no credentials or expertise in infectious disease, but I have never thought of myself as unusually or uniquely naïve. I am coming to realize that when it comes to this virus, I have been both naïve and unrealistic.

When we made the decision to close the church to in-person worship on March 13th I had hoped that we would be able to be back together for in-person worship on Easter Sunday.

When it became clear that that would not happen, I had hoped that we would be back to in-person worship today, April 26th, because today was supposed to be this year's First Communion celebration. Kids receiving the First Communion on the Sunday when the story that we read tells us, reminds us, that Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread. How perfect would that have been? I had hoped.

When my sister told me, back in March that the state of Virginia had cancelled school for the rest of the year, I had hoped that it wouldn't happen here, that some way would have been found to get the kids back to school for the end of year.

When this first started, I had hoped that it would have been under the control by the summer so that some of our plans wouldn't have to be cancelled.

Naively, unrealistically, I had hoped.

Now, I'm aware that some of my hopes were simply self-protection. Early on, I said, "I'm going to figure this thing out week to week, Sunday to Sunday. I'm not going to try to project out for months, because if I do, I'm going to cause myself undue stress."

I fell back on good scriptural advice, found the gospel of Matthew, "So, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6:34)

But in spite of that sound philosophy, as the scope and scale of the situation that we are in reveals itself to us day by day, I realize that, while I had managed to stop myself from worrying about tomorrow, for the most part, I had not stopped myself from hoping. I have had unrealistic hopes as we have traveled on this road and I will probably have more.

But this week, as we headed into this Sunday, the main thing that I had hoped was that I would be able to preach a sermon that did justice to one of my favorite stories in the Bible.

But I admit I was struggling with it. How could I preach on the story of the Road to Emmaus on a Sunday when we wouldn't be having communion, when Jesus can't be made known to us in the breaking of the bread?

And then I remembered those First Communion kids, from last year, hearing for the first time what was, to me, a very familiar story, a story I know so well, that even though I love it, maybe has lost a little bit of its wonder, a little bit of its capacity to astound. I remembered their gasp when Jesus was made known to the grieving disciples in the breaking of the bread, but I also

remembered their question, “Why couldn’t the disciples recognize Jesus on the road; when he was walking with them and talking with them and sharing scripture with them?”

That’s great question, an amazing question.

I think I always thought that maybe God had closed their eyes in some way, so that Jesus could be fully revealed to them in the breaking of the bread, as a sign for the church, that it was in that meal, when bread is broken and wine is shared, that the followers of Jesus should expect to find Jesus, reliably and predictably present, a kind of confirmation of Holy Communion, a reinstitution of the Lord’s Supper as a place where they would experience Jesus’ presence, reminding them that he had told them,

“Take, eat, this is my body.

Take, drink, this is my blood.”

But what if all this time, when I was moving so quickly through the story to get to what I have always thought of as its culmination, to the shared meal, to the breaking of the bread, what if I was wrong? What if the reason that Jesus couldn’t be recognized while he was walking with the disciples down the road, was that the disciples were blinded by their own disappointed hopes?

They had hoped that Jesus would be the one who would redeem Israel.

They had hoped for some kind of miracle worker, mighty in deed and in word, for someone who had the kind of power that would mean that he would never be able to be arrested by the Temple guard, the armed servants of the religious establishment.

They had hoped for some kind of military leader who would overthrow the Romans.

They had hoped for a king. They had hoped for a victory. They had gotten a crucifixion.

Now, please don't miss the fact that these disciples, walking down the road to Emmaus on Sunday evening, on Easter Sunday evening, had heard about the resurrection. They told the "stranger" who was walking down the road with them all about it.

Cleopas, the spokesman for the two had said,

"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." (Luke 24:22-24)

They had the testimony of the women who had followed Jesus all the way to the cross. They had the testimony of the women who had seen where he had been buried. They had the testimony of the women who had woken up early on Sunday morning to go to the tomb to anoint Jesus for burial, the women who all along had risked being arrested as Jesus' followers, so that they could stay with him.

They even had the testimony of the other disciples who had gone to the tomb and found it empty, just as the women had said, even though they had not seen Jesus.

But still when Cleopas and the other disciple stopped on the road to talk to the stranger, to tell him their story, they looked sad. That's what the text says. It says, "They stood still, looking sad." (Luke 24:17b)

They had good reason to believe that Jesus was alive. But they did not believe it. All they had was sadness and disappointed hopes.

They had hoped for an earthly victory. They had hoped for a liberated nation. They had hoped for the downfall of empires. And those hopes had been disappointed.

They had no capacity to hope for new life, for restored life, for resurrected life, for eternal life. And so, they couldn't see it, even when it was walking down the road with them, walking down the road of their disappointed hopes with them.

Even when Jesus was right there with them, they just couldn't see him.

And I'm wondering how many times we are the same way. I'm wondering how many times I am the same way.

Blinded by my fears, blinded by my sadness, but almost more dangerously, blinded by my hopes for the ways that I want things to be, so that I cannot see Jesus walking with me, cannot understand his words, cannot feel his presence, cannot recognize even my own heart burning within me, as I respond to the presence of my Lord.

Now, I'm not giving up on Communion. I still believe, still know that Jesus is made known to us, is fully present with us, in the breaking of the bread.

But I also know that Jesus is also with us, here, where we are, on this strange and rocky road that is taking us to a place where we will indeed see Jesus in the breaking of the bread again, this road that is taking us to our

own Emmaus, even though we don't know how long it will take for us to get there.

But all along the road Jesus is with us, walking with us, listening to us share our disappointed hopes, and meeting us at all of the tables where we sit and break our bread.

Whether we are alone or gathered with family members, there is surely one guest always with us, on this road, and at all of our tables, Jesus is with us, our hearts burn within us, and our eyes are opened. Thanks be to God. Amen.