

## RECOGNIZING JESUS

Luke 24:13-35

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“We had hoped.” This is what the followers of Jesus said when they were walking home that first Easter Sunday afternoon. “We had hoped that Jesus was really the Messiah.” The Festival of the Passover is over and Jerusalem is emptying out. It is always this way after the Passover. The city’s population swells for the holiday and then people begin heading for home. But for followers of Jesus, this wasn’t just another Passover. This was a roller-coaster week, as our children’s sermon put it two weeks ago. This was the week of highs, when Jesus entered the city as a king, with people shouting “Hosanna”, proclaiming him to be their savior. This was the week when he overturned the tables at the temple in anger. This was the week he was betrayed by one of his disciples, then again by one of his closest friends. They all fell asleep in his hour of need. He was put on trial, and accused, and beaten. The crowds turned on him with mocks and jeers and taunts. He was stripped, forced to carry a cross. His body was nailed. He spoke from the cross, words of prayer and need and forgiveness. He died, and his body was placed in a tomb. And then this morning the strange news from the women, but surely that was just an idle tale.

Those who had known him - not the disciples - but those in the next circle, most likely - those who had heard him speak, more than once - those who were influenced by him - they are walking home and talking to themselves. Going over and over these events, trying to make sense of them. It’s what we do after a trauma. We need, most of us anyway, to talk about it, to tell it over and over. I have sat with people after the death of a loved one. I’m sure many of you have, too. And our first instinct is to come up with words. Something comforting, something reassuring. Fill the space with words. But often what is most helpful is to leave the space. Be

present, but don't worry about the words. And it may happen that the person who is grieving will want to talk. She will need to repeat the story. It helps to tell it.

And so they're walking home telling each other every detail of the week just ended. One fills in what the other forgets. They're concentrating, deep in thought, and grief, so much so that they don't notice that someone has joined them. Perhaps they were oblivious because of their mood. Or I think it's also possible that there were many people on the road that day; there would have been thousands leaving Jerusalem after the weekend.

For whatever reason, they don't notice the stranger who has joined them. And then he speaks, "What is it you're talking about?", he asks them.

They look at him, they're silent for a moment. Grief-stricken. Then the one named Cleopas says, "Don't you know what happened in Jerusalem this weekend?"

"Tell me," says the stranger.

And so they tell him everything. Not just an objective report, but an emotional re-telling of the events of Holy Week. Their words convey their faith. They tell this stranger about Jesus, a prophet mighty in both word and deed. "We had hoped," they say, "that he was the one, the Messiah, the savior, the one who would redeem Israel."

We had hoped. These two friends of Jesus express their despair, their deep disappointment. We had hoped. These are words that we know. These are feelings that we know. We had hoped. Disappointment is a miserable state. Disappointment is the letdown after we had allowed ourselves to hope. Disappointment is the letting go of a dream. We had hoped.

We had hoped that he would get the job. We'd imagined it, we'd thought about where we would live.

We had hoped that the news from the doctor would be better...

We had hoped he would be able to stay sober...

We had hoped we'd be able to reconcile...

We know about disappointment. We can imagine these two friends, walking home, trudging. One foot in front of the other. Telling the story to themselves again and again. Can it really be? Is it really true that our hopes have all been dashed?

Is life really back to normal now? The way it was before we ever met Jesus? Is there nothing more than just obeying the laws and hoping not to get in trouble? Is this all there is to life? And actually it's worse than before. If Rome killed Jesus, they could kill Jesus' followers, too. Without Jesus, our lives are nothing more than drudgery and fear.

We were different when we were around him. We were hopeful. We saw the world differently. We saw possibility. We really believed that things were turning around. He made us feel as if our lives mattered, as if all lives mattered. Not just the rich and powerful, but everyone.

We had hoped. We had hoped. They tell all of this to the stranger. They say to him, "And then this morning, the most odd thing happened. The women who went to prepare his body for burial said the tomb was empty."

The stranger looks at them and then starts to talk about scripture, telling the story of God's relationship with God's people, from the beginning of time. "Don't you see how it all fits together now?"

There's no indication of what Cleopas and his companion are thinking as this stranger talks to them about scripture and recent events, and how the two fit together. Luke doesn't give us a hint of their reaction to this conversation which must have seemed awfully strange. Perhaps their grief prevents them from knowing what to say. Perhaps they're too confused, taking it all in. We don't know.

Then they arrive at Emmaus and the stranger seems to be going further. But they say to him, "Stay here for the night. It's almost dark." He stays. It's dinner time. They sit down

together for the evening meal. The stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the others. In that moment, they recognize Jesus. They know him in the breaking of the bread. He is not a stranger; he is the risen Christ. And then, the next moment, he disappears.

Cleopas and his friend, though, are changed, and changed for good. It's night time by now, but still they leave home and head back to Jerusalem. They have to tell everyone what has happened. It's real! The resurrection is real! Peter saw Jesus, and now we have too. We recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

It doesn't matter that Jesus is no longer physically present. Once you know him, once you have been touched by him, you no longer need his physical presence.

It is enough to remember the way you felt that time that he touched you. Those times that he touched you. It can happen more than once. It can happen many times. It may have happened to you last week when you sang the Hallelujah Chorus. You were transported, your faith was lifted. You felt something which I will call the presence of the risen Christ. It happens when we see our children and grandchildren for the first time...and not just for the first time. It can happen when we feel deeply loved, accepted and forgiven. It can happen at church camp, or in our memorial garden. It can happen when we say goodbye for the last time to a loved one. It can happen through music, it can happen in nature, it can happen when we're alone. It can happen when we're working on something that thoroughly engrosses us; we are lifted above normal understandings of time and place. We are tapping into our God-given creative gifts. We are experiencing the presence of the spirit of God, the spirit of the risen Christ.

And sometimes, it happens at the table. This table or any other. It doesn't have to do with the quality of the food or its expense. The meal can be gourmet or simple. It has to do with the company. Where two or three are gathered, we're told, there the spirit can be felt.

I hope that you've known meals where the food was secondary to the conversation, where you felt as if time and place just fell away. You connected to another human being on a different plane.

I hope that sometimes this meal is like that for you. It probably doesn't happen every time. I know it doesn't for me. Sometimes we have other things on our minds. Sometimes we're distracted. This meal helps us remember the presence of God in our lives. This meal helps us remember Jesus, what he did, what he said, the way he lived, the way he loved. We can recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

The nourishment we receive at this table transforms us. Before we come to the table, we are people who had hoped. After the table, we are people who hope again. In Christ, all things are possible. Life will disappoint us. Jesus knows that. But we don't have to dwell in disappointment. We can choose hope. The presence of the risen Christ, known at this table, gives us the courage to choose hope.