



Hope in the Present Tense

TEXT
Luke 24:13–35

April 12, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

We start a new sermon series today, “Faith That Is Not in Vain.” It’s our Easter series, a way of helping us all remember that Easter is not just a day — Easter is a whole new way of living. Long ago, the apostle Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain.” He wrote this to the church at Corinth.

At first, it doesn’t sound much like Easter, does it? *If Christ has not been raised . . .* It’s set up to be a conditional statement. If this is true, then that is true. It’s a way of arguing based on logic: If this, then that. But Paul twists it a little. He mimics the scholarly rhetorical style of his day.

As a way of driving a point home, he suggests the exact opposite of what he means. “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain.” It’s like a parent saying to a child, “If the sun does not come up tomorrow, then you do not have to go to school, and you do not have to do your chores.” For a second, it sounds like there’s wiggle room in the discussion

— until you realize that the sun always comes up; or until you realize that the Son has indeed been raised up.

It’s just a few lines later in Paul’s argument that he makes that clear. “But in fact,” he writes, “Christ *has* been raised from the dead.” If this, then that. Since Christ has been raised, our proclamation is not in vain, and your faith is not in vain. In other words, your faith is real because resurrection is real. He takes a while to get there, but that’s what he’s saying. Over the next several weeks, we’ll look at those moments in Scripture that reassure us of that — those post-resurrection moments when Jesus shows up again, to help us understand.

In this week’s text from the gospel of Luke, I bet those two travelers on the road to Emmaus would have appreciated that sort of reassurance. Two of them are walking along, talking about everything that had happened: Jesus’ death, those two women seeing angels and saying he was alive, but no one actually seeing him. As far as they know, he’s gone. So I imagine their conversation was filled with stretches of silence and occasional laughs and probably more than a few “Do you remember when’s?”

That’s what our conversations sound like when grief takes them hostage. Sorrow and delight get all intertwined. Every wonderful story breaks your heart a little more, and every break allows another story to leak out. It’s just the way it goes. I witness it all the time.

Somewhere along their way, somewhere on that mysterious seven mile stretch of road, a stranger joins them. “What are you talking about?” he asks them; and in that moment, the sadness wins. The two tell this unknown one about Jesus of Nazareth, and they utter what must be some of the saddest words in the entire Bible: “But we had hoped . . . but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” Hope in the past tense is just about the saddest thing I know. The only thing worse might be hope in the imperfect tense.

I admit that from time to time, I have to remind myself about the grammar I learned so many years ago. So just in case you are like me and need a refresher: Imperfect verbs tell us that something happened in the past, but they also tell us that it happened over and over and over again in the past. So it’s not just that these disciples hoped for a fleeting moment, for a blink of

an eye. No, they hoped and they hoped and they hoped, over the course of years. And now they don't hope any more. There is nothing more devastating than imperfect hope.

Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway once accepted a challenge to write a real short story in no more than six words — a story with a beginning, a middle and an end — a story real enough that it could evoke actual emotion from readers. After giving it some thought, he wrote: “For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.” That’s hope in the imperfect tense; when it’s not just the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but also the gaping hole of everything that could have happened, but now won’t.

We’ve all hoped, haven’t we? Maybe you had hoped that your loved one wouldn’t die. Maybe you had hoped that job would become more fulfilling. Maybe you had hoped that the marriage would last, that your spouse really could change. Maybe you had hoped that retirement wouldn’t be so lonely. Maybe you had hoped that high school wouldn’t be so lonely. Maybe you had hoped that our politics would look different. Maybe you had hoped that the church wouldn’t let you down again. Maybe you had hoped that today you’d find the courage to say something more than “Good morning, I’m fine.” Maybe you had hoped for just a moment to catch your breath. Maybe you had hoped that there wouldn’t be any more instances of white cops killing black men. “We had hoped ...”

Honestly, I wish the story played out a little differently at this point. I wish that as soon as Jesus heard them say, “We had hoped,” I wish he would have come clean right then. I wish he would have interrupted their despair and answered their questions right then, instead of waiting. How often do we wish that God would abide by our preferred schedules and agendas? How often do we wonder why God doesn’t show up when our souls are hemorrhaging with need?

I read a blog written by a woman named Glennon. She recently posted a beautiful piece about teaching Sunday school one day.¹ They have a designated Sunday school hour, so her class of young children was meeting in the sanctuary. Her co-teachers had started the lesson, and Glennon was handling crowd control when she spied a new student. His name tag read “Ryan,” and his eyes, she said, “were big, and deep, and sad.” Partway through the lesson, Ryan motioned for Glennon. He had a question.

She leaned in and watched as he looked all around the sanctuary, and then looked at her, and he said: “Excuse me. Is God coming?” And then he looked around again, as if God might show up the same way that Ronald occasionally shows up at McDonald’s.

She wrote, “I just stared at him, this little boy who had just asked me the question that every single human being who has ever looked around a fancy sanctuary, or a busted up family, or a hurting friendship, or a shocking diagno-

sis, or a messy world is thinking: ‘Excuse me. Is God coming?’”

I’m going to assume you’ve asked that question. I certainly have.

Glennon stumbled through an answer — something about how sometimes God sends us to show up for each other; something about how when we do that, that’s how we see God. And she said, “It’s like how sometimes your daddy sends your mommy to pick you up, and sometimes your mommy sends your daddy.” All the other kids nodded their heads. Ryan sat quietly, and then he said, “My daddy doesn’t pick me up. My daddy is in heaven.”

“Excuse me. Is God coming?”

“But we had hoped ...”

I wish that the story turned right there; that God showed up and scooped Ryan up right then; that God opened the travelers’ eyes so that they could see Jesus right then. I wish that it had happened that way — because I don’t like to see people hurting, and because I don’t know anyone who likes to be the one who is hurting. I wish that it were different; but over time, I have also developed a deep gratitude for the story as it is.

The three continue on walking for some time, the two travelers and Jesus, not knowing — you know, I almost said none of them knowing who their traveling companions are, but that’s not quite right. Cleopas and the other disciple, they don’t know who the stranger is. We know he’s Jesus. To them, he’s just a stranger. But Jesus? Jesus knows exactly who they are, and he knows where to find them.

The text tells us they are on the road to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem — which is great, except that this is the only time we ever hear of Emmaus, and we have no evidence of any sort to suggest such a place ever actually existed. Maybe it did. It's an unknown. But seven is a number we know about. Seven is the number of completion, so if I had to put that all together and harbor a guess, I'd say that what Luke wants us to know about these two is that they are in completely uncharted territory. That's grief.

They are wandering around in an unknown place, accompanied by an unknown person. But Jesus knows them. I'm convinced of it. He knows them, and he walks alongside them, long before they even realize that's what's happening. Isn't that how it so often is with God and us? So I am grateful that the story doesn't play out the way I want it to, but rather that it plays out the way we need it to — maybe a little too close to reality for my wishing, but maybe that's how it comes to matter in our real lives.

But still, I have to say, even more than that, I have become grateful for the way Jesus finally chooses to show them who he is. After they have been traveling together for quite some time, when the day is nearly over, the stranger takes bread, holding it in a way that seems so familiar. And he blesses it and breaks it, as if he has done this before. And when he gives it to them, he gives them so much more than a meal.

He gives them resurrection. He gives them hope, real hope, hope in the present tense, because it is then, finally then, that their eyes are opened, and they recognize him. And they see that the stories are true. They see him.

I am so grateful this happens at the table, in the rhythm of sacrament and ritual, at a place we come time and time again, with nothing more than ordinary bread and ordinary juice. If I'm reading it right, this is Jesus saying: "There will be so many moments you cannot control. There will be so many days you wish you could see me a little more clearly. There will be so many opportunities for you to lose track of who you are or where you are going. And when that happens? You come here. You come to this table. This is a place you know. This is a place where you know what to do. You come here, and your eyes will be opened, and you will see me, and you will taste resurrection, and you will find hope poured out all around you, because this is who I am, and this is what I do, and this is where it happens. This is where you will find me. This is where you can always find me."

It's right after that that Luke tells us that Jesus disappears. Right after they recognized him, the gospel says, "He vanished from their sight." And it's OK. He's told them everything they need to know. He has shown them, proven to them, that he has indeed been raised, that their faith is not in vain, that hope is theirs once again. So it's OK. They understand now. We understand now.

"Excuse me. Is God coming?"

After Ryan told Glennon about his dad, she said to him: "Ryan, honestly, sometimes it's hard to tell. But here's what happens when I notice that God is with me. My heart starts to feel bigger. It feels like it's swelling up. It feels like it's getting so big it might crawl up through my throat. Like right now, sitting next to you — my heart feels huge. All filled up. And when my heart feels full, I think that's how God reminds me that God is here." And Ryan's face broke into a smile, and he said, quietly, "I know what you mean."

So friends, in a few minutes, this will be your invitation: Come and break bread; come and fill your heart full up.

Is God coming? As sure as the sun rises each morning, as sure as the Son has indeed been raised, God is right here.

<http://momastery.com/blog/2015/04/01/most-important-question/>

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.