
DASHED HOPES TO BURNING HEARTS

It would be easy to jump to the celebration and grandness of this story.

- Their hearts burning as JESUS opens the scriptures to them;
- the breaking of the bread as we do when we share the sacrament of the LORD'S table;
- the revelation that JESUS has risen,
- and their rush to share the good news with others.

Yet this is not where this story begins.

- It's easy to go to the celebration as we live on this side of the cross.
 - But in doing so, I think we miss the power of the resurrection as it became reality for HIS followers back then,
 - and we overlook some important and valuable lessons that can speak to us as we seek to live as faithful disciples in the midst of the challenges of life, even today.

Let's begin by noticing that this story takes place on a road.

- It's not a garden or a room, like the first places JESUS appeared.
- It's not a mountain top or any other place where we might expect revelation to take place.
 - It's a road.
 - And it's not a pronouncement or discourse, but a conversation.

I think these details are important.

- Sometimes, as we heard last week, it's enough to just see JESUS, or hear of HIS resurrection, or to be promised HIS presence.
- And sometimes it's not.
- Sometimes it takes longer.
- Sometimes the movement from doubt, fear, and grief to faith, hope, and love takes both the time needed to walk from one town to another and the opportunity for an open and honest conversation.

I think it's important that our congregation be a place where this happens.

- Where we take the time to think over what we've heard.
- Where we actually talk over life experiences in the light of faith.
- Where we are honest about our disappointments and grief.
- Where we find the grace and patience to bear with one another and where we explore with each other the questions that life brings.

Consider today what may be the three saddest words in Scripture...or in our own lives for that matter: "We had hoped..."

- In this case, it's "we had hoped that HE was the ONE who was going to redeem Israel."
- In our own lives it might be:
 - "we had hoped that our child would recover," or
 - "that this job would last," or
 - "for a better relationship," or
 - "that the cancer would go into remission," or
 - "that our church would grow."

Few things are more painful than dashed hopes.

- And so, before JESUS interprets the Scripture, before HE breaks bread, HE does two things:
 - HE comes along side these forlorn disciples and HE asks them to name their loss.

How do you mourn?

- When disappointment strikes, many of us try to minimize our sorrow:
 - "It's not that bad."
 - "It's really not that big a deal."
 - "There will be other chances."
- And often friends chime in with platitudes to try to make things well:
 - "Something better is waiting out there."
 - "Just think, it could have been worse."
 - "There's a reason this wasn't meant to be."

Yet, following JESUS example today, one of the healthiest things we can do is to name our pain, our grief, our loss, and allow others to do so, too.

- Doing this is essential to moving beyond the loss and the hurt.
- Not to erase them or even leave them fully behind,
 - but to transcend them so that they are no longer what define us.
- Naming our pain is what creates room to be surprised.

The disciples are disappointed in part because they essentially misunderstood how GOD was working to save the world.

- Expecting a GOD of power, they got ONE of vulnerability.
- Expecting a warrior GOD, they got a SUFFERING SERVANT.
 - And while it might be tempting to chide them for their lack of understanding, I think it's important to recognize that their own hopes and dreams made it all but impossible to understand JESUS in any other way.
 - They thought they knew what they needed.
 - They believed that they knew what was best for themselves, for others.
 - And seen this way, it seems no surprise that they miss what GOD is doing, and are slow to understand.
- To put it another way, while the disciples may be disappointed because they misunderstand GOD'S work, their pain and grief are real, and this is where JESUS meets them.
 - HE invites them to name the cause of their disappointment so that there is now room to be surprised by GOD'S decision to show up just where the least expect GOD to be.

Two and three years ago, our disappointment and grief were that we could not celebrate the resurrection like we wanted to, like we had always known.

- Instead of the pinnacle of celebrating under the decorated cross raised high above us, we met in a parking lot.
- Instead of organs and flowers in the comfort of our worship center, we sat in cars and wondered:
 - For how long would we be at the mercy of a pandemic?
 - Would we ever be able to come together in the same way we had before as believers in JESUS?
 - Was this really Easter?

Our story was much closer to that of those two disciples on the road to Emmaus two thousand years ago.

- And yet, as HE did back then, JESUS came and walked with us in the midst of our doubts.
- JESUS did come and join us, not in a worship center, but in a place, not unlike a road between villages.
- JESUS did come and the scriptures were opened to us and the bread was broken,
 - and the good news of the resurrection was announced and claimed, and hopefully we rejoiced in what GOD was and is doing.

Perhaps as we worship today, later portions of our service might become even more meaningful if we begin with an honest confessing of what things we are grieving, fearing, and suffering.

- On the sermon note form I ask our confirmation students to use as they listen to the sermon, one of the first things they are encouraged to write down is what is their mindset at the beginning of worship and why.
 - It challenges them to think about how their worship experience is shaped by their own attitude as they come into GOD'S presence.
- At the end of the form, they are asked again to name their mood and consider why it might be different than when they began.
 - Hopefully, they discover that their encounter with GOD, even for a few minutes on a Sunday morning, can positively shape their attitude as they return to the world and the week ahead.

Perhaps if, during the course of this sermon, you have been genuinely thinking about your life, your disappointments, and fears, and pain, you too, might be reshaped by what GOD offers to you today.

- Might your hearts burn as the scriptures are opened and you see again all that is new that the LORD is doing?
- Might your attitude begin to climb as you gather before the LORD'S table and in the breaking of the bread knowing that this is much more than something we do to remember an event centuries ago?
- Might you find hope and gratitude in recognizing that JESUS has again offered HIS body and blood on the cross for you,
 - and then in this way entered into your life and become part of you as you go into this week?

JESUS has given HIS life to free you from the burden of shame and doubt

- and then returned to assure you of grace and forgiveness and acceptance that can truly make room for a new reality,
 - for something you had not expected to happen because frankly, it couldn't happen, but it has.

All of us are on a road.

- Some may need only to walk seven miles, while for others it more like seventy, or even seven hundred.
 - But that's okay because JESUS will walk that distance with you, and so will we.
 - And JESUS comes to share a conversation that opens us to all of GOD'S possibilities, not just at the end of the road, but even as we stop to rest.

- We are not alone.
- We can bring our hope—dashed or still growing—and our questions—spoken or still lingering in the depths of our hearts—and JESUS and this community will not just welcome them, but cherish them.

From dashed hopes to burning hearts.

From confession to the breaking of the bread.

From disappointment to joy.

- This is the movement of Christian faith and experience because it is, finally, the movement from the cross to the empty tomb and from death to life.
- The road is before us.
- JESUS walks with us.
 - And at the end, the truth is revealed.
 - HE is risen. HE is risen indeed!