

“What Are You Discussing?”

Luke 24:13-35

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That’s a great ending to that story, isn’t it? I love stories with great endings, especially surprise twists. Like the movie “The Usual Suspects,” which ends with the line, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing people he didn’t exist. And like that, he’s gone.” Such a great ending. Or the ending of “The Sixth Sense” and the reveal about the dead people Haley Joe Osment had been seeing. Or how about the ending of “E.T.,” when the spaceship shows up and you realize E.T. was actually an alien. OK, some of you may have figured that out earlier in the movie than I did.

Our story today was a great ending, but if you only remember the ending, you’re missing the most important part of the story: the journey. I was having a conversation once with a couple, and the wife was telling a rather long-winded, meandering story that I’m sure had a point somewhere at the distant end of it. I could tell the husband was getting impatient, and finally he blurted out, “C’mon, Honey, we don’t want to hear about the labor, just show us the baby!” In this story, we want to get to the baby, the new life it presents us, without going through the labor of the journey. And yet, for me, the way my faith has developed over my life strongly resembles the narrative arc of this story: a long journey filled with questions, struggles, forays into scriptures and discussions with traveling companions, with a few fleeting glimpses of Christ in my midst along the way.

In the story it’s Easter Sunday, and Cleopas and the other unnamed person – that’s peculiar, hold onto that – are traveling back to Emmaus from Jerusalem, where some amazing and perplexing things have happened. So here’s my question: If there’s talk of a missing body and appearing angels and a risen Savior in Jerusalem, why are they leaving? If I were them, I would want to stick around, to find out what’s going on, to get to the bottom of all these glorious rumors. Why are they heading out of town when all the answers are behind them?

Because what’s behind them represents the destruction of their dreams. Barbara Brown Taylor says that “hope in the past tense is one of the saddest sounds a human being can make.” Cleopas says, “We had hoped that he was the One who was going to redeem Israel.” We had hoped. We had hoped for an optimistic diagnosis. We had hoped to spend the rest of our lives together. We had hoped to have a giant graduation celebration or big birthday party. There is nothing that rips your heart out like hope in the past tense. If Jesus had truly been the one to redeem Israel, he should have been defeating pagans, not dying at their hands. We had hoped.

As the story continues, you see the irony at play here, right? The travelers are walking along, chins dragging, when this stranger – we know who it is – comes along and asks them, “Why the long faces?” And they say, “Hey knucklehead! Are you the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on?” Then, they begin to explain to him all that had happened and how their dreams had been dashed and how this prophet Jesus had disappointed them by having the audacity to let himself get killed. Cleopas literally says, “No one has seen Jesus,” and he says it to Jesus!

I was in the drugstore recently to pick up a prescription, and the pharmacist said to me, “This prescription is for Kory?” and I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Can you verify the address?” And I gave my address. And he said, “Has she ever used this medication before?” And I wanted to say, “Dude, I’m her! I’m standing right in front of you, how can you not know me?” I wonder

how many times I've asked God to be with me, to give me some kind of sign, and all the while God has been standing in front of me going, "Dude, I'm right here! How can you not know me?" How often have we walked lonely roads and gone through difficult times thinking we are all alone, only to find out that Jesus was walking beside us and we didn't even know it. It gives me hope to know that God won't stop walking beside me just because I don't acknowledge his presence.

After the travelers pour out their hearts, Jesus responds rather unsympathetically, "You're calling me a knucklehead? If you'd read your Bible, you wouldn't be surprised." And he proceeds to interpret the biblical story for them in light of his resurrection. Because that is how the story must be heard. That is how all stories of faith must be heard. The Creation Story, Noah's Ark, Joseph and his fancy coat, Moses and the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the prophets' warnings and predictions...all these stories, all the stories in the Bible, are illuminated for us Christians when read in light of what God has done through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to hear the ending yet? Well, too bad. You're just gonna have to sit there in your pajamas and hear a bit more of the story, because that's reality. See, you can't skip ahead in this story because we can't skip ahead in our stories. We don't know the future, we don't know what's going to happen. And for many of us, as we go through this terrible time of quarantine and isolation, we need to know what's next. We need to know when we can resume our lives, our businesses, our time of worship. We need to know but we can't. We have to go through the labor to get to the new life. What this story reminds us is that we don't walk alone; we have a fellow sojourner who offers us a different perspective than hope in the past tense.

What this story reminds me is that I believe in a God who has this amazing knack of taking dead dreams and resurrecting them in surprising ways. For the two travelers and for us, what may on the surface look like the end of hope may actually be the beginning of a new hope. God's promises are trustworthy. God is good, God is with us, God will bring about good, although maybe not in the ways we plan or expect. Who knows when Christ will appear in our lives, walking beside us, helping us to make sense of life?

One reason this story makes me hopeful is it clues me into the kind of people who experience Jesus' presence. In this story, he didn't come to those who had it all figured out. He didn't walk with people who were able to keep a smile on their face while their world was coming to an end. Instead, he comes to those who are disappointed, doubtful, disconsolate. These two travelers? They didn't even know their Bibles! They don't recognize him even when he's walking right beside them! Jesus comes to those who have given up and are headed back home. He comes to people like us.

When the travelers get to Emmaus, this stranger becomes a companion. Did you know that the literal translation of "companion" is "with bread"? The traveling companion took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them. And their eyes were opened. What did they see? Maybe it was the hands, because the hands that broke the bread would still have holes in them. Or maybe it was the actions -- took, blessed, broke, gave -- that reminded them of another meal just a few days before in Jerusalem, a meal where the host said, "This is my body, broken for you."

And just like that, the dashed hopes are replaced by something even stronger -- faith. Faith in the one who was dead but now lives, faith in the one who walks beside us on the journey, helping us to make sense of life's attempts to crush our spirit. And the two travelers

immediately return to Jerusalem and find that what they could not bring themselves to hope for – resurrection! – was true.

Of course, they only came to this realization after a journey. That gives me hope that my own faith journey doesn't have to be an all-at-once experience. It's gradual, as we walk along our journey, as we hear scripture Sunday after Sunday. Sometimes it doesn't make any sense, or we just can't seem to figure out it. But other times, our hearts are opened and we experience God's word as if it was for the first time, God's word shines like a light into our places. Then someone takes bread, blesses it, breaks, it shares it, and Christ presence is revealed to us. Cleopas and the unnamed disciple had their hope restored through the experience of hearing scripture and breaking bread. I think there was a reason the other disciple went unnamed. Ready for the surprise twist at the end? I think the other disciple was you. And me.

We are on quite a journey, aren't we? I have no idea where we're going or when we'll get there. I still speak of hope in the past tense – of Easter, of Baptism Sunday, of baseball and March Madness. But then I remember this story and the fact that Jesus is walking with me every step of my journey, God is working through the difficulties of life to bring about good things. And that gives me hope. Not hope that everything will be all right, but hope that, no matter what happens, Christ will be our companion. We are not alone. Because of that, we don't have to speak of hope in the past tense. Thanks be to God.