

Easter...So What?
Luke 24:13-35
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That's a great ending to that story, isn't it? And what a twist? Those guys had no idea the stranger was Jesus. I love stories with surprise twists. There may even be one at the end of this sermon! You remember the movie, "The Usual Suspects"? It ends with the revealing of the true identity of Keyser Soze and 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 one that rocked my world as a kid, when we learned at the end of "The Empire Strikes Back" that Darth Vader was – put on your ear muffs if you haven't seen it yet! – Luke Skywalker's father. Mind blown! And the biggest twist ending of all in "Titanic," when the ship sinks. Who saw that coming?

Easter is the twisty end to Jesus's life, a life ends, not with death, but with – spoiler alert! – resurrection. Who saw that coming? But the story can't end there. If it does, we can read it, admire it, say, "Cool story, bro," but it has no real impact for us. In my 25 years of preaching Easter sermons, this is the first time I've not preached the resurrection. I always struggle to figure out what I can say that adds anything to the power of this story. But this year, I realized that, more than ever, people have good reason to cast a critical eye at religion. If you don't believe me, I have a special Easter blessing I'm selling for \$1000 and God will assign an angel just for you! This year, more than ever, people are saying, "Easter...so what?" If we stop at Easter morning, Jesus' resurrection is more of a magic trick than a life-changing event. So, if we want to figure out what Easter means for us today, we have to keep reading.

In our story today, it's Easter Sunday afternoon, and these two followers of Jesus – one is named Cleopas, the other is never named – are making the seven-mile walk to Emmaus from Jerusalem, where some amazing and perplexing things have just 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 peculiar 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 companion or a more fulfilling job. 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 the Romans, 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?" That's like someone coming to Lexington and saying, "Hey, does anyone around here distill grains in a brown alcohol called bourbon?" So, the two travelers begin to explain to this stranger 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! You have to be careful what you say around people.

After the travelers pour out their hearts to this stranger, 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 them in light of what God has done through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when we see that story as the culmination of God’s continual faithfulness to us in spite of our constant knuckleheadedness.

It’s easy for us to criticize these two for not recognizing Jesus, but are we guilty of the same thing? Do we see Jesus when he’s right in front of us? I was in the drugstore recently to pick up a prescription, and the clerk 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.

But let’s not be too hard on ourselves. It’s hard to see Jesus with us when we’re focused on hope in the past tense. Like these two travelers, we are in the middle of our journeys, and things don’t always make sense to us. We don’t quite understand why things happen the way they do. We get caught up in the tensions of what feel like irresolvable conflicts or inexplicable events. Why did this happen? Where is God? What this story tells us is that not only does Christ’s resurrection make sense of the stories in the Bible, it also makes sense of our story, if we look at our lives through the lens of Christ’s death and resurrection, if we look for Jesus around us, especially when he feels absence, we’ll see him at work, comforting us, guiding us, loving us.

This story reminds me 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. Easter is a living reminder that God is at work in that diagnosis, in that job change, in that life transition. God’s promises are trustworthy. God is faithful, 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 for us 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, those who aren’t even sure this faith thing is worth it, those who are saying, “Easter...so what?” He still 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 past-tense 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. Not a perfect faith, maybe just the size of a mustard seed, but faith nonetheless. And the two travelers immediately return to Jerusalem and find that what they could not bring themselves to hope for -- resurrection! -- was true.

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, for things I had hoped would happen. But then I remember this story and the fact that Jesus not only was resurrected but is resurrected, is walking with me every step of my journey, that 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. "Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

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 darkest 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. Ready for the surprise twist at the end? I know who the unnamed disciple is, the one who was on a journey and plagued with doubt, but heard God's word and tasted God's love and saw Jesus walking beside them and believed resurrection was real, not just for Jesus but in their life, too. You know who it is? It's you.