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But We Had Hoped

During the Crusades there was a story, the presiding Bishop of Christianity wanted to have all Jews removed from Jerusalem, which caused great unrest. Ultimately it was decided that if someone in the Jewish community could debate the Bishop, proving reason why they should not be exiled, they could stay. No one dared stand up to the Bishop, until finally the Street Sweeper took up the challenge, on condition it be a Silent Debate! No one knew exactly what a Silent Debate was, but on the appointed day and hour, two chairs were set on a platform at the town center for all to see. The Bishop raised 3 fingers, and the man raised 1 Finger. The Bishop replied by pointing to the Horizon, but the man pointed to the Ground where they sat. Finally the Bishop brought out the Chalice & Bread of Communion, the man took out an Apple and bit it. The Priest raised his hands announcing "I give up, you win!" After, the crowd asked: What happened? The Bishop said: "I said, we believe in the Trinity, to which he replied, The Lord our God is One. I said, I look to the hills from whence does my help come? And he replied God is here and now. I showed him the Sacrament of Communion and he replied by reminding me of Original Sin." The Street Sweeper said "He told me we had 3 days to leave, and I told him Not One of us would leave. He said All the world belongs to the Church and I replied that the Lord gave this place to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David. Finally, he took out his lunch, so I brought out mine."

One of my favorite things about the Bible, is that the contexts of the readers reveal differing elements of every passage. The Bible does not simply have one static meaning and interpretation for everyone. At one time I served on the original Board of Directors for The Emmaus Spiritual Counseling Center. Every month for two years, the 12 of us gathered and read this passage, then heard each person's reflection, and over those 2 years we heard over 250 different interpretations ALL of which were true and valid. This morning there are three points arising in this passage which occur to me.

First that this Resurrection appearance is misnamed. This is not about the Road TO Emmaus, not so much as it is about the Road AWAY FROM Easter. Going for a walk can be a good and healthy thing. We sleep better after a daily walk. Walking restores our rhythm and pace to life. Walking, we see and take notice of things we miss when driving in the car or focused on tracing a golf ball. Getting out of our houses and routine, allows us permission to step outside ourselves, to throw caution to the wind and scream, to weep, to work through ideas and problems we never could sitting alone in a room. AND as we shared in one of our first sermons together 6 months ago, that there is a "spiritual walk" almost like dancing, we take several steps forward, only to rock back on our heel or take a step backwards, before proceeding. My wife Judy and I were just beginning to know everyone's name, and now with six weeks apart and maybe more, I fear we will have to ask you to forgive a number of "Green Valley Moments" as we take a step back and learn names anew.

I said this passage was misnamed, because there is nothing here of why these two were going TO Emmaus. Other than this story, there is nothing historically or Biblically significant about Emmaus. Instead, while the Disciples were locked away in the Upper Room for Fear; while Mary went to the Tomb early, weeping, and ran back confused; while Judas took his own life; these two tried to Get Outta Town. These are the four basic reactions of our reptilian/ Amygdala brain, what are routinely referred to as "The Fight or Flight Mechanism." That in crisis and depression, our primordial instincts are to Run, to Hide, to Fight or Die. Cleopas and this Other disciple, chose to leave Jerusalem, to leave everything Jesus had taught, to leave behind everything they thought they knew, give up, walk or run away. The Empire won, The Death Penalty of Crucifixion was intended to scare and intimidate imitators, followers to give up, to choose to forget Jesus, to abandon being followers of his Way and scatter in fear and doubt.

These two encounter a stranger on their walk, who seems clueless of what has happened to Jesus, they endeavor to explain who Jesus was, that he came to Jerusalem in Triumph, but people abandoned him, killed him, buried him, so these two too were walking away. When going on a journey, taking a walk, I often repeat and revisit lost circumstances, relationships where perhaps if only I could have made myself understood, been given opportunity to explain, if I could have made my feelings known, I could have controlled the circumstance and changed the outcome... But having tried this for many years, what I have painfully come to understand was that rather than my talking more, perhaps I needed to listen more. At which point the one leading shifts, and Jesus explains what they had never understood.

The 2nd element that leaps out at us from this passage is that painful, most-Human phrase the two state "BUT WE HAD HOPED..." Ernest Hemingway was a great short story-teller. He was once asked, what is the shortest short story you could write? He wrote on a Napkin, "For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn." He could have as easily written "Engagement Ring, Never Offered" "Bridal Gown, No Wedding" "Diplomas and Degrees, No Jobs." These 4 words in Luke: "But we had hoped..." name the human condition of Broken Dreams, Hope Lost, Giving Up, Walking away. These words make us want to know the story behind Why. We become stuck in a spiral that can go no where. Whenever there is a death, we desperately want an autopsy, to know why, to have a cause, but the question an autopsy cannot explain away is Our loved one is taken, gone. The opposite of Faith is not Doubt, the Opposite of Faith is Knowledge/Certainty, Walking Away from the quest to understand differently. Knowledge is a wonderful thing, Knowledge is the human quest for understanding. But Knowledge cannot explain our Convictions, Hopes, Beliefs, Dreams, Love. Ironically, Doubts can possibly make our Faith, Convictions, Hopes, Dreams, Love deepen. But Certainty, Knowledge, only confirms what we already know.

The 3rd element of this passage and why I love it so much, is Jesus' response to these two disciples, which makes sense in Aramaic, but is very difficult to translate smoothly into English. A word for word translation would be that "JESUS MADE OPEN-MINDED THEIR MINDS TO THE LIKE-MINDED CONNECTIONS OF ALL THE WRITINGS OF SCRIPTURE". This "OPEN-MINDEDNESS" comes from the same phrase we have in Deuteronomy, "To love God with All your Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength." This is a place where I fear a colloquialism is the very best we can do: JESUS BLEW THEIR MINDS! When these disciples had turned away in fear, believing they knew what happened, they knew Caesar won; Jesus Blew their Minds by opening up the connections from the Garden of Eden, through Abraham being asked to sacrifice his Son, Isaac being torn apart by Jacob and Esau, Moses' Laws of 10 Commandments, the rise and fall of Kings David and Solomon, the Exile of Judaism, every one of Jesus' Parables and Healings of outcasts, NOW fulfilled in the Death, Resurrection and our Redemption of God's Son.

The final thing, we need to wonder about with this passage this morning, is a SO WHAT. Two Disciples went on this journey, one we know was Cleopas, the other is unnamed. Whenever the Bible leaves a character unnamed, A Levite's Concubine, Jephthah's Daughter, A Rich Young Ruler, A Tax Collector, A Centurion, A Samaritan, A Disciple, the invitation is for us to see ourselves in that role.

Kathleen Norris in her book, Dakota, A Spiritual Geography, describes that "Conversion requires starting where we are, not where or what we wish we could be. Conversion does not offer a form of knowledge that can be quantified, or taught. It is best learned over a lifetime and in community." Throughout the last several weeks, through all of Lent and now Easter, the world has been afraid, we have been filled with fear from a plague of death. That is a natural human response, we want to live, we want our children, loved ones to be Safe. However, the question everyone's been asking is "We want to know how soon we can go Back to Life?" The point is not going BACK, humans never want to go backward. Instead, what from this worldwide historic experience can we make connections with to carry into our future? Here I am not talking about Washing your hands while singing Happy Birthday, or Being Socially Distant from one another! What do you want to Believe and How do you want to Live?