

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 23, 2023

Hopes

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“We had hoped...” What a poignant phrase! It’s also one of those phrases that we have all likely experienced the sting of at some point in our lives. “We had hoped for that promotion...” “We had hoped to get into that school...” “We had hoped we could work it out...” “We had hoped to have children...” “We had hoped the cancer was in remission...”

Cleopas and his companion are walking to Emmaus in the shadow of the cross. They are walking along in the confusion of dashed hopes and dreams, likely wondering to themselves, “What now?” Imagine the week these two have had, the hopes and dreams they held while they watched the crowds welcome Jesus with palms and shouts of praise. I wonder if they envisioned a rebellion that would have ended with Jesus on a throne and Rome thoroughly expelled from Israel. Perhaps they were imagining advisory positions for themselves and rooms at the palace. Or perhaps they simply dreamed of being able to live their lives without Roman soldiers, or Roman taxes, or Roman regulations.

Who knows what exactly they were dreaming of, but what happened to those dreams when Judas arrived with the temple guard? Once they all scattered and deserted Jesus, what did they hope for then? Were their dreams simply to find one another safe and sound at that point? What hope did they have after hearing the crowds shout “Crucify him!”? Maybe dreams of angels descending and spirited them all away?

What hopes did they have at Golgotha? When the sky darkened and the earth shook, did their dreams turn to nightmares? “We had hoped...” for anything other than a cross, for anything other than death. “We had hoped...” what powerful words of pain and despair.

Our reality can get warped when we're in the midst of sudden and massive transition. And that is exactly what Cleopas and the others are going through here. They've dedicated up to three years of their lives to following and learning from Jesus, and in a matter of days that purpose is wrenched from them. Their hopes are dashed and they're struggling to figure out what's next.

The text introduces this scene by mentioning that these two disciples are "talking with each other about all these things that had happened."¹ Human beings seem to have a profound need to review, almost relive, powerful experiences as we're trying to process them. I wouldn't be at all surprised to catch them re-telling the same story over and over again, trying to remember details and double-checking shared memories. In many ways they're spinning their wheels, a common challenge in times of transition, especially transitions that are forced upon us. We can get bogged down in rehashing the old and lose sight of the new.

It's no wonder they are kept from seeing Jesus, not necessarily by God's power or will, but perhaps simply by their grief, loss, and despair. They're walking to Emmaus in the shadow of the cross, in the midst of dashed hopes and dreams. It's amazing they didn't get lost on the way given the state they're in!

And who should join them on this shadow-covered journey? Jesus. Jesus meets Cleopas and the other right where they are. He doesn't rebuke them for not recognizing him. Instead, he invites them to share their burdens with him. He gets them talking about what is clearly weighing on their hearts and minds. Then he challenges them, calling them foolish and slow of heart because they are still so trapped in their old hopes and dreams...the old hopes and dreams that needed dashing.

Then, as we have witnessed so many times before, after meeting these disciples where they are, tolerating and accepting them as they are, then challenging them, finally Jesus provides what they need to meet the challenge. Jesus teaches them so powerfully that their hearts are burning within them. Burning with new dreams, burning with new hopes.

All of this culminates with hospitality and a shared meal. Precisely what those two needed after hours of walking and talking...food and rest, blessing and recognition. Jesus gives these two new dreams and new hopes and then

¹ Luke 24:14 (NRSVUE)

reminds them of his great promise to always be with them in the midst of shared community and shared communion.

Then it's up to them. Jesus doesn't force them to go a certain direction or give them detailed plans for what's next. No, instead Jesus leaves them to make their own way forward. And what do they do? They return to the others. They head back to Jerusalem, likely at night, but they're no longer travelling under the shadow of the cross. Their sight is no longer hampered by dashed dreams and lost hopes. They travel back to the other disciples to share the news of their encounter. They go back to share new dreams and hopes, they go back to equip the others the way they've been equipped. Their wheels are no longer spinning in place, they go back to Jerusalem, but they're moving forward now.

What shadows are you walking under? What's hampering your ability to see the world around you? What dashed dreams or forsaken hopes are you struggling with? And how might Jesus be walking along side you? Who is Jesus sending to be your companion for this part of the journey? What new dreams and hopes is the Holy Spirit kindling in you?

Or perhaps you're not under a shadow right now. Maybe you're fed, rested, and blessed for something new. Where might God be prompting you to go? Who might God be sending you to? What new thing will you bear witness to? What new dream are you working towards? Do you feel your heart burning?

Hopes are powerful; we grieve them when they're dashed, and we feel lost when they are taken from us. They can certainly color our whole perspective on reality. They can also move us forward, sharpen our mission and give us direction. Hope can bind us together and inspire amazing things in us. Lost hope can stop us, renewed hope gets us moving again. No wonder Christ renews the hopes of those two disciples. No wonder Christ reaches out to us to renew our hope too.

So, whether you're hopeless and stuck, or hopeful and moving; know that Christ is with you. Just as Christ was with Cleopas and his companion both under the shadow of the cross and out from under it. Christ journeys with you too. He's there, meeting you where you're at, tolerating your brokenness and unbelief, and more than tolerating you – loving and accepting you, giving you what you need, and then challenging you...inviting you to live as you were created to live. Hopeful in God, hopeful in life, hopeful in love. Amen.