

~ From the Bishop



“Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad.

¹⁸Then one of them, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these

days?”¹⁹He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

~Luke 24: 16-21

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesus walks alongside Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus and listens to them. And as they talk and try to make sense of recent events, they share their disappointed hopes, that this man Jesus was the one on whom they had placed some substantial expectation, no less than the redemption of Israel as they hoped Jesus would free the country from oppressive Roman rule, and more than that, hopes for the unmistakable presence and action of God in the world. “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they say. We had hoped.

I dare say, we know that feeling of heartbreaking disappointment. You can hear that feeling in the words, we had hoped the tumor would be benign. We had hoped the treatment would work. We had hoped the job would pan out. We had hoped... Or perhaps more to the point of who we are as the church... We had hoped that the decline would abate. We had hoped the Sunday school would grow, we had hoped to see a turn around by now, that my church would stay open long enough to see me buried

there, that we'd be able to pay the bills. We had hoped that things would get better.

To Cleopas and his companion, Jesus exclaims, “Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe!” Jesus has heard their disappointed hopes, and yet, in this exclamation we hear of the disconnect, the lack of alignment between their hopes and what Jesus knows that God is up to. Cleopas and his companion may have hoped for the defeat of Rome and the restoration of Israel, but Jesus lets them know that God's hopes are oh so much bigger than that. That there is so much more going on than just their small and limited perspective of what salvation means and how this first Easter afternoon moment is about so much more than their present pain and grief, no matter how acute and heartbreaking it is.

I do believe we are in a similar moment, although for us, the moment is spanning years, decades even. Like Cleopas and his friend, in our moment, we cannot see the bigger picture of what God is up to. You know, and I know, that the church is different than it was 500 years ago, and it's different from what it was 50 years ago. Even 30 years ago. In the everyday work of ministry, things are continuing. Communities are being served. Christ is proclaimed in word and deed. Faith is being formed. But of course, if we look at the trends of the last 30-50 years, we see a marked and steady decline. There are more empty pews, less young people, whole demographics that are missing. Our average age is, well, older. More and more of our congregations will close. Beautiful and beloved buildings will be sold or repurposed. It's already happening.

We had hoped.

But consider, for what had we hoped? That things would stay the same? And what would that have looked like? When I was growing up in the church, I don't remember ever hearing the exhortation to invite my neighbor to church. Probably because my pastor, and everyone else, simply assumed that my neighbor

and everyone else's neighbor, was already going to church. They were already saved. The only people who needed saving were the godless heathen that lived across some ocean. And so the church faithfully and generously attended to that by placing an offering for mission in the offering plate. The Mission Field was over there, way over there. And our job here was to do church well, and for the most part that meant attending to the education of members, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and the care and comfort of those who claimed the church as their church.

Now, thirty to fifty years later, the mission field has changed. And it is no longer so easily attended to as putting an offering in the offering plate. Suddenly, we have to work at it. It takes effort, conversation. It takes building relationships until there's a level of trust in which you have the courage to extend an invitation to worship or you finally find the words to describe why Jesus matters to you. Such things have not been the focus of our tradition.

We have not been taught how to do this. How to consider the mission that sits across your dinner table or next to you at the café. We have not been trained in how to talk about Jesus with the co-worker in the cubicle next to you, or the classmate whose locker is next to yours. This is not your fault. And it's not your pastor's fault. And it's not your Bishop's fault. The world has shifted, and no one told us to put it on the calendar. But this is our walk to Emmaus moment. This is the moment where we realize that there is more going on than our present grief and pain, no matter how acute or heartbreaking.

Our hopes that our current congregations would maintain the status quo is perhaps not the hope that is in God's mind. It might well be that God has something bigger, something that is so much more than the longevity of any single beloved congregation. God is up to something. The Holy Spirit is on the move. And we would be blessed to see this present moment, our time in history, as opportunity.

This is where we get to learn something new. This is where our hearts will burn with the unmistakable presence of God in Christ Jesus who breaks open the kingdom of God and asks us to consider more than just our present pain and anxiety. It's not just about keeping the doors open. It's not just about paying the bills. It's not about keeping things the way they are, or getting back to the way they were, as if we ever could. It's about Jesus. It is, and always has been, always and forever, about Jesus. How then, are we to be faithful to this moment, our moment, that is only a part of the decades it will take for the fulcrum of history to turn? How are we to be faithful as our Easter afternoon journey with Jesus continues?

It is not an easy thing, to see past the grief and pain of the present moment and trust that God has a bigger plan in mind. Anxiety runs high. We feel the threat of loss. And the present circumstances demand that we be church in a way where we have yet to learn the skill set that is necessary. And it is difficult to align our hopes with God's plans when we have no idea what that plan is. We may not see it in our lifetime. Yet, as we move around this corner of time, we are being shaken out of our stupor of disappointed hopes to see and understand that the road is before us, our time in history is now, our Emmaus moment is now, and the journey, while it has taken a turn, continues.

But you do not walk this road alone. Jesus is with you. Jesus walks alongside you. And you know him. Your hearts burn with a desire to serve him, and they burn with deeper knowledge than this world can provide. You are the church. You are the body of Christ in the world, nourished at his table, fortified in the scriptures, blessed with the presence of Christ in each other. And you are sent, to come alongside those who are in grief and pain, and listen to their disappointed hopes, hear what they have to say, and let them know that you heard them. And then, be the presence of Christ to them. Let them see in you, the one who died and rose. The one in whom our hope rises. Let them hear your story, and hear from you, why it is that Jesus matters. Amen