

Sermon for Easter 3 Year A 2020
A Graveyard of Buried Hopes?

This week's gospel—which is one of my favorite stories in all of scripture—has put me in mind of a scene from one of my other favorite “secular” stories—Anne of Green Gables.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Anne (spelled with an “e”):

She is a character from a series of books written by

Lucy Maud Montgomery written at the turn of the last century.

The setting of the books is Prince Edward Island in Nova Scotia.

Anne is an orphan who is adopted when she is about 12

by a brother and sister, Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert,

who run a farm called *Green Gables*.

They had intended to adopt a boy,

but Anne was sent to them “by mistake” instead.

One of the banes of Anne's life is her bright red hair—

which attracts teasing and nicknames from her classmates.

The scene from Anne's life that today's gospel has me thinking about takes place shortly after Anne has arrived at Green Gables.

She and Marilla are walking together to town.

Anne tells Marilla that she has hopes that her bright red hair will darken into a fine auburn or chestnut brown as she matures.

Anne asks Marilla if she's ever heard that that could happen.

Marilla responds, “No, I don't know as I ever did, and I shouldn't think it likely to happen in your case either.”

Anne sighs and says,

“Well, that is another hope gone.

'My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes.'

That's a sentence I read in a book once,

and I say it over to comfort myself

whenever I'm disappointed in anything.”

To which Marilla responds:

“I don't see where the comforting comes in myself.”

Perhaps some of us sympathize more with Marilla's point of view—

No surprise, I'm sure, but I've always sided with Anne's view of things.

My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes . . .

But we had hoped that . . .

There are so many tragic endings to this sentence uttered by two disciples on their seven mile walk away from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus.

Lutheran Pastor Heidi Neumark of Trinity Lutheran church in Manhattan, invited people in a FB post earlier this week to complete that sentence:

But we had hoped that . . .

As you might imagine, she had hundreds of responses.

The advent of the pandemic and the shut down has caused all of us—of any age—to feel the pain of “buried hopes.”

So how would you complete that tragic sentence,

But we had hoped . . .

I’m going to give you a few moments to think about your answers.

I think its important to name them—

after all, that’s exactly what Jesu does.

He invites these two heartbroken disciples

to tell him all about troubles and their hopes.

So, what did you name?

But we had hoped . . .

Our answers are likely particular ranging from postponed or cancelled graduation ceremonies and celebrations,

postponed or cancelled gatherings of all sorts

from funerals to birthday celebrations or even weddings.

Whatever your answer, I would say that the unrealized hope

which is the baseline of all the others is that

we had hoped that we would be done with sheltering in place by now and able to get back to life as we knew it before.

Am I right?

Perhaps now we feel Anne’s pain . . .

My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes . . .

We had hoped . . .

We certainly find ourselves on this third Sunday of Easter
traveling a road that's uncomfortably familiar.
Every one of us, regardless of who we are, knows this road.
We've walked it before.
We've lost our way on it.
We've left it behind and then returned to it.
The road is the road to Emmaus,
and we recognize it by the words we speak when our feet hit its rough
and winding way one more time.
But we had hoped . . .

The words we speak on the road to Emmaus are words of pain,
disappointment, bewilderment, and yearning.
If ever there was a time of communal pain, disappointment,
bewilderment and yearning . . .
the times we are living through now are certainly one.

In the story from Luke, Cleopas and his unnamed companion tell a
stranger who appears alongside them as they walk to Emmaus on the
evening of that first Easter—
But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

As far as they know—Jesus is dead.
The Lord they staked their lives on,
the Messiah they thought would change the world,
has died the most humiliating and gruesome death imaginable,
and his promises of a new kingdom have come to nothing.
Worse, Jesus' tomb is empty,
his body is missing,
and the women who loved and followed him appear to have gone mad,
what with their bizarre reports of angels, gardeners, and talking ghosts.
How completely things have fallen apart!
But we had hoped for so much.

It's a bit startling to remember that the Emmaus story is an Easter story.

According to Luke’s gospel, it happens on the Resurrection Sunday. On the very day when—well, at least in past years—our churches are full of people and flowers and “Alleluias”—the road to Emmaus stretches out ahead of us that very evening—offering defeat, disillusionment, and misrecognition. Which is to say, sometimes resurrection takes longer than three days. Sometimes new life comes in fits and starts. Sometimes, seeing and recognizing the risen Christ is hard.

This year, as the pandemic crisis continues to wreak havoc around the world, I am grateful for the honest witness of this post-resurrection story. I’m grateful that the journey continues into Easter evening, when hope is possible but not yet realized. I’m grateful that even the road to Emmaus—the road of brokenness, the road of apparent failure—is a sacred road. A road that Jesus walks. A road that honors our deep disappointments, even as it holds out possibilities of revelation and nourishment.

As I meditation on the gospel for today, what strikes me is how much the Emmaus story reveals about the heart and character of Jesus. Once again, I am reminded that Jesus is not who I think he is, and not who I even want him to be. Who is the would-be stranger on the broken road? How does he respond when all appears lost? What does he do for the weary and the defeated?

Here are some things I noticed:
First, I noticed a quiet and gentle resurrection. Perhaps we would expect that a God who suffers a torturous and wholly unjust death would come back with a vengeance, determined to shout his triumph from the rooftops and prove his accusers and kills wrong. But Jesus does none of that.

As far as we know, he doesn't enter the Temple and make a scene.
He doesn't appear to the Sanhedrin, or show up at Pilate's house,
or set the sky ablaze in some way.
He makes absolutely no effort
to vindicate himself or avenge his cruel death.

Instead, on the evening of his greatest victory,
the risen Christ takes a walk.
He takes a walk on a quiet, out-of-the-way road.
When he notices two of his followers walking ahead of him,
he approaches them in a guise so gentle,
so understated, and so mundane, they don't recognize him.

This is not, I'll admit, what I always want from the resurrected Christ.
But we had hoped . . .
that he'd be more dramatic.
More convincing.
More unmistakably divine.
We had hoped he'd make post-Easter faith easier.

Part of the disappointment we face on the road to Emmaus is the
disappointment of the quiet, gentle resurrection.
The disappointment of God's maddening subtlety and hiddenness.
The disappointment of a Jesus who prefers the quiet, hidden encounter
to the theatrics we expect and crave.
Perhaps we are inclined to agree with Marilla when she told Anne—
"I don't see where the comforting comes in that . . ."

But then, I notice how there is healing through story.
As soon as Jesus falls into step with the companions on the road,
he invites them to tell their story—
What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?
Astonished by the question, the two travelers tell Jesus everything.
They share with him their faith journey—its rise and its fall.

They tell Jesus how high their expectations had been
for their now-crucified leader,
“a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.”
They describe their devastation at his death.
Their confusion, their loss, their uncertainty.
They tell Jesus their whole story.

And Jesus listens.
He hears them out, allowing them
the balm of expressing all that they think and feel.
And then—when they are done—he tells the story back to them,
and as he does so, the story changes.
In his retelling, it becomes what it really always was—
something far bigger, deeper, older, wiser, and richer
than the Emmaus road travelers understood.
Here’s what you’re leaving out, Jesus seems to say.
Here’s what you’re missing.

When Jesus tells the story, he restores both its context and its glory.
He grounds the story in memory, in tradition, in history, in Scripture.
He helps the travelers comprehend their place in the greater narrative
that long precedes them, a narrative big enough to hold their
disappointment without being defeated by it.

When Jesus tells the story,
the death of the Messiah finds its place
in a sweeping, cosmic arc of redemption, hope, and divine love
that spans the centuries.

When Jesus tells the story, the hearts of his listeners burn.

For me, the experience of the Emmaus road
always involves a narrowing of my story.
My lens becomes very small, short sighted.
I lose all sense of the big picture.
I lose all ability to place my life
in the broader, more expansive context of God’s all encompassing story.

Like the two travelers, I need Jesus to meet me on the road,
and weave memory, scripture, context, pattern, purpose and history back
into the tiny narratives I cling to.

I need the Word—eternal and all-loving—to shape, hone, chasten, and
enliven my understanding and my perspective.

But we had hoped the story was bigger.

We had hoped it would have a better ending.

Well, it is and it does.

Finally, this story of the road to Emmaus helps me to notice the
smallness of things.

Once Jesus and his companions are seated around the table,
Jesus takes bread.

He takes, blesses, breaks and gives.

Small things.

So small, but it changes everything.

During these hard days of sheltering in place,
hearing horrific stories of death and suffering,
and fearing for our futures

as individuals, families, communities, and nations,

it's difficult to trust in the transformative power of small things.

A bit of bread.

A sip of wine.

A common table.

A shared meal.

But the Emmaus story speaks to this power—

the power of the small and the commonplace to reveal the divine.

God shows up during a quiet evening walk on a backwater road.

God is made known to us—this day—at this table—

but also around our dinner tables.

Christ reveals himself when we take, bless, break and give.

God is present in the rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days.

What does this mean right now?

It means God is the text you send or the phone call you make
to a lonely person you can't visit during quarantine.

God is with us in our Zoom gatherings—in worship and at prayer or just
in fellowship.

Jesus is the stranger you see across the street
when you are walking or sitting on your porch—
both of you smiling—perhaps beneath a protective mask.

The sacred is in the conversation you have with your stir-crazy children,
the technology you attempt to master
so that you talk to your friends across the distances,
the loved one who challenges you to reframe the story of these days in
the light of God's inexplicable provision and love.

If the Emmaus story tells us anything,
it tells us that the risen Christ is not confined
in any way by the seeming smallness of our lives.

Wherever and whenever we make room, Jesus comes alongside us.

But we had hoped . . .

Yes, we had.

Of course, we had.

So very many things are different right now
than we had hoped they would be—and how we continue to hope.

And yet.

The stranger who is the Savior still meets us on the road of *buried hopes*.

The guest who becomes our host still nourishes us
with his presence, word and in bread and wine.

As we keep walking, let us keep telling the story.

Let us keep honoring the stranger.

Keep attending to the word burning in our hearts.

Christ is risen.

He is no less risen on the road to Emmaus than he is anywhere else.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!