

Moving from Disillusionment to Resurrection Reading: Luke 24:13-35; Easter 3/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 4/30/17

When my mother died suddenly after an operation some 27 years ago, I grieved her loss. I didn't wail and gnash my teeth nor did I go into a deep depression. Instead, a cloud settled over me for about 10 months, overshadowing my joy and dimming my eyes from seeing the good things that surrounded me. It was my second year of seminary and frankly I don't remember much about that time except that it was difficult and challenging. Moments of blessings and grace during that period of my life continue to escape my memory. As I recall, I simply placed one foot in front of the other in an attempt to finish my middler year of seminary. This was my own journey to Emmaus, a road that was long, tiresome, and filled with potholes.

Maybe you have taken such a journey after a significant loss or disappointed. Maybe life didn't turn out the way you had planned or you lost 'the love of your life' or you were diagnosed with a chronic disease. If so, you know what it feels like to be stuck in a place of disillusionment, forced to say good-bye before you were ready. Such is the case of two disciples who had experienced the devastating events of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Stuck between disillusionment of the past and acceptance of a different future, they trudge onward to the village of Emmaus, seven miles NW of Jerusalem. Let's take a closer look at today's gospel story.

It was the first day of the week. Jesus had been dead for two days. These two disciples could not fully grasp the good news of the women at the tomb. What they knew was that Jesus had been tortured and crucified, thus dashing their dreams for an earthly messiah. With their heads downcast, having lost hope, Cleopas and his friend share their grief with one another on the long road to Emmaus. While the two disciples were mourning the loss for what they had hoped for, (that Jesus would redeem Israel from the occupation of the Romans), a stranger suddenly appears. However, they do not recognize him. In fact, they become irritated when this stranger seems ignorant of the events surrounding Jesus. They even seem a bit rude.

I think this is a common response when we are wrapped up in our own grief. When we are sad, it becomes more difficult to recognize the Light and to rise above our grief with kindness towards others. When we are distressed and downcast, it becomes more difficult to imagine a new future filled with alternative possibilities, especially when we are attached to a particular program for happiness. The disciples were no exception. Unable to recognize who is walking beside them, they continue their lament: "We had hoped" the disciples had said, not "we remain hopeful." Hope is an openness to the future. It is the belief that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present. Without hope, the human heart would break and that is what happened to these two disciples.

The stranger makes a rather pointed remark about how foolish they are because of their lack of understanding. The actual word is *anoaytos*, which can be translated as dull, dense, unmindful, or just plain stupid. They are not able in their current state of mind to connect the dots or to see a new future. Isn't that how we sometimes are when we are grieving a great loss? Filled with painful thoughts, disillusionment clouds the mind and ramps up the emotions. In this instance, a cloud had settled upon the disciples, a cloud with which I am well acquainted.

Then the risen Christ begins to speak to them about suffering and the human condition and interprets the things about himself in the scriptures. And even though his explanation makes sense, and even though their hearts were burning within them, they were still unable to recognize the stranger. The good news is that their hope was finally restored when they invited the stranger to stay with them. While at table, the risen Christ took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Yet, he immediately vanished from their sight. It was in the breaking of the bread that the risen Christ was made known to them. It was in the breaking of the bread that their hope was restored. And it is in the breaking of the bread that the risen Christ is made known to us today.

Each Sunday at Trinity, “we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory.” Each Sunday at Holy Communion, we bless, break, and share the bread and wine as a sacramental gesture in opening ourselves up to an experience of the risen Christ. We yearn for healing through this sacramental act, longing for a movement from disillusionment to acceptance, from death to life, from cynicism to hope.

Yet if we are honest, many of us remain stuck somewhere between distress and belief, between dashed hopes and promises fulfilled. It is not an easy place to be, especially when we are too wounded or jaded to live into a resurrected future. But the good news is, the risen Christ, the Spirit of God, is that in which we live and move and have our being. We don’t have to go anywhere or do anything to access this treasure trove of grace. We simply need to relinquish our expectations of the past and our tightly held programs for happiness. And one of the ways we access this grace is through the breaking of bread each Sunday; holy food for holy people.

In her book, “Praying our Goodbyes,” Joyce Rupp speaks about how to live through the experience of unwanted goodbyes and difficult farewells. While there is “no magic remedy to move us through these painful separations, what does make a difference is how we approach our losses. If we move through the crushing anguish by tending to our hurting self and allowing others to be there for us, if we rest our weariness on the heart of God and give ourselves sufficient time to heal,” if we partake of the graces offered to us in our daily lives and in the breaking of bread, we will find comfort, courage, and the willingness to move forward.

“Goodbyes are as much a part of life as the seasons of the year. The story of gain and loss, of joy and sorrow, of life and death, of union and separation, is inside each one of us. Who of us has not said farewell to someone and felt a great heartache and a deep sadness, wanting to stop the process and wondering when the ache inside would ever leave.” (Rupp)

Grief and loss are real and they impact our lives with pain, distorted thinking, and a grim view of the future. Grief is the human reaction to the loss of something that we hold dear. There are two ways to grieve. The first is mourning, letting go of some beloved person or thing, knowing that nothing in this world is permanent. This is a normal way to grieve. The second kind of grief is persistent grief, the refusal to let go of the beloved, believing that we must have the object of our love in order to be happy. Persistent grief can lead to all sorts of suffering, including but not limited to anger, depression, and the inability to work through one’s losses. It is a form of idolatry that diminishes one’s life.

The resurrection makes it possible to see life in a new way as well as embrace the promise of a life beyond this earthly one. But even so, resurrection does not erase the deaths we face on a daily basis: The death of a relationship; the death of a child, the death of a dream, the death of a perfect job, the death of freedom, the death of health and independence, the death of civility and respect in society, the death of truth telling. These are all very real deaths and the resurrection does not take these deaths away.

I am not sure of the exact moment when the cloud lifted from my countenance after the death of my mother. I do not know exactly how it happened or whether I did anything concrete to allow the rays of sun to shine through. But what I do know is that the cloud lifted! Death and loss are not the final word. I learned that out of the ashes of destruction, new life can and does appear. I learned that resurrection is not a one-time historical event but a promise that the future holds possibilities that are not evident in the present. Resurrection is the confidence that with God, all things become possible.

The road to Emmaus shows us that when the snares of death encompass us, when disillusionment clouds our vision for the future, the Son remains with us. The road to Emmaus is that place where we begin to recognize the risen Christ, those new possibilities of joy and new life. It is a road that actually gets us somewhere beyond our pain to that place where we can once again recognize and start to live out the life-changing presence of the resurrected Christ. Alleluia Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!