

¹³Now, on that same day, two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴They were talking with each other about all of these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing this, Jesus himself approached and began to walk along with them. ¹⁶But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷He said to them, “What are you talking about as you walk along?” Saddened, they stopped.

¹⁸One of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

¹⁹“What things?” he asked them.

They replied, “The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. ²⁰The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be condemned to death. And they crucified him. ²¹But we were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel. Not only that, but besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²²Also some women of our group amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning. ²³When they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb. They found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.”

²⁵He said to them, “How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸As they approached the village where they were going, he acted as if he were going to travel farther. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, since it is almost evening, and the day is almost over.”

So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he reclined at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and began giving it to them. ³¹Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Then he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was speaking to us along the road and while he was explaining the Scriptures to us?” ³³They got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem. They found the Eleven and those who were with them assembled together. ³⁴They were saying, “The Lord really has been raised! He has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵They themselves described what had happened along the road, and how they recognized him when he broke the bread.

Together with Cleopas, you decided to take the road back to Emmaus from Jerusalem. You had been there to celebrate the Passover with hundreds of thousands of your fellow Jews. But the week had gone so terribly wrong. The teacher you had come to know and trust had been killed. So, slipping out of town on Sunday afternoon probably sounded like the best course of action.

As you made the seven-mile journey back home, you talked. No talk radio stations or classic rock channels. Just conversation. And what would you talk about? Obviously, the crazy and

saddening week you had just experienced! And seven miles would give you plenty of time to ask the hard questions, the questions churning around in your mind. But every question you talked through to unravel the mystery of this terrible week only led to more questions, questions unanswerable.

Much like our highways, you shared the road with others, getting off at this city or joining at that city. A man started walking next to you, alone. Because he didn't have anyone with him to chat with, he joined your conversation: "What are you talking about as you walk along?" This stopped the conversation in its tracks. Your friend asked, "Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" How could he not know the biggest news spreading across the countryside? Had he been living under a rock?

So, the man invited you to share: "What things?" You replied, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be condemned to death. And they crucified him. But we were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel. Not only that, but besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Also some women of our group amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning. When they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb. They found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." You can hear the despair in your own words. You were hoping. You were hoping he would redeem Israel. You were hoping he would step in and heal every mistake you had made. You were hoping he would come near you and take care of you when everything in life seemed so hopeless. But now that day had come, and where was he? Dead. And even his body had gone missing.

Hopelessness was not just an experience for the Emmaus disciples, was it? It also seems to infect our lives much more than we care to admit. We feel hopeless when our plans come crashing down. We echo these disciples: "We were hoping retirement would finally be filled with vacations and time with the grandkids. Then my husband got sick." "We were hoping that the Lord would bless us with kids, so that we could raise them with all the love in our hearts and show them Jesus. But the we never got a positive test." "We were hoping that the family drama of the past wouldn't hang over our heads, that there would eventually be healing and forgiveness. But we still don't talk."

What causes you to wrestle with hopelessness? What are those "we were hoping"-thoughts in your life? What are those things that you play through again and again in your head, trying to figure out what went wrong and how to fix it, only to hit the brick wall of solutionlessness?

And when this happens, don't you start to believe the lie that Jesus has failed you? He promises to work all things for my good. So why did bad news come out of the doctor's mouth? He promises that he will always be with me. So why do I feel so alone, even sitting here in a room full of people? He tells me my sins are forgiven. So why do I still feel so ashamed of my past?

Our hearts yearn for the peace that always feels just out of reach. They yearn for things to be just as we imagine. But often things are not as imagined, not because God is powerless to redeem or mend or solve, but because we are looking for Jesus to be something less than what he is. Let me give an example from the Emmaus disciples.

We are not told what exactly what they expected from Jesus before his death, but it obviously wasn't a sacrificial death and a glorious resurrection. They probably thought of him as more than a rebel leader. They probably even understood that he was coming to rescue his people from sin. But they certainly did not understand that the redemption of Israel would come about through Jesus' death and resurrection. So, they were stuck in their hopelessness, trying to understand the reports from the women and Peter and John, but ultimately coming to the conclusion that Jesus was dead and would remain dead.

That's what we conclude when our hopes are seemingly dashed too. Maybe Jesus is too busy. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he and all his teachings are nothing but fraudulent lies. Is this what we convince ourselves of when life gets rough? Do we pout like petulant children when we don't get our way, hearts stomping away and thoughts screaming out "I hate you" to our heavenly Father? Are we too looking at Jesus as something less than what he is?

Let Jesus respond to your hopeless doubt: "How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter his glory?" How arrogant you are to think you know better God's plans than the Almighty! How pitiful are your hearts that would rather instruct and test Christ than take him at his word and trust his promises!

This man on the road spoke to you, calling you a fool for refusing to believe what had been foretold through the prophets of the past. And as the walk continued, he began placing the pieces of the puzzle you had been trying to fit and answering the questions you believed were unanswerable. But as you rolled into Emmaus, you wanted to hear more. You invited him to your house: "Stay with us, since it is almost evening, and the day is almost over." So, he let you invite him in for a meal.

When he had broken bread, blessed it and given it to you, you recognized him as the Lord. And now it all made sense. The conversation on the road. The ability to connect all the promises of God to the Messiah he had sent. And as soon as you realized this, he vanished. His work here was done. You saw and heard what you needed to see and hear. Fear became confidence. Hopelessness became hope, and not the kind of hope we are used to talking about, but the kind of hope God speaks of in his word.

We talk about hope as if it is a blind aspiration. We hope summer will bring some relaxation and fun, though those things are not guaranteed. We hope the kids stay healthy after a season of constant colds and flus, but that probably won't be the case. We treat hope like a rally cap at a baseball game or crossing our fingers as the Powerball numbers are read off. But this is not the way

God uses the word hope in his word. For God, hope is a certainty of what is going to come, speaking as if it is already here. Hebrews 6 says, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul. It is sure and firm, and it goes behind the inner curtain, where Jesus entered ahead of us on our behalf, because he became a high priest forever like Melchizedek.” 1 Peter 1 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, into an inheritance that is undying, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

Jesus gave true hope to two men who were living without it. And they expressed it: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was speaking to us along the road and while he was explaining the Scriptures to us?” Jesus on the road had told a story to their hopelessness, that the redemption of spiritual Israel – all believers of all times – did not hinge on whether Jesus died or not. It hinged on the fact that he had risen in conquest over death. Since Jesus had risen, all their doubts of his forgiveness and fears of God’s wrath and punishment were swept away.

Last May I sat in my old college gymnasium as my youngest brother graduated, and the pastor who was preaching gave all the graduates some deeply practical advice: live on this side of Easter. His point was that our sinful nature tries to convince us to live on the other side of Easter, to live with hopelessness and uncertainty. This is where the “we were hoping’s” live. This is where we are surprised (and even a little doubtful) that Jesus would visit us. Living with a pre-Easter mindset will naturally lead to despair, like the women approaching the tomb, or fear, like the disciples locked in the upstairs room, or confusion, like these two Emmaus men.

But Christ is risen. Easter happened. Sin is paid for and all God’s promises to bless you and keep you are as sure as the sun coming up each and every day. Living on this side of Easter means living with the God who has conquered death and hell for you. It means approaching even the hardest days knowing that even when you can’t see his hands at work, they are. It means dealing with sin and brokenness not in shame and fear, but with the confidence that there is nothing you have ruined that Christ cannot and will not restore in repentance and forgiveness. This is why it is so important we live on this side of Easter. Because Easter takes yearning hearts and makes them burning hearts.

This, in fact, is why we worship on Sundays, because every Sunday is another little Easter. And when we are here, Christ comes to us through his word and sacrament to bring us hope, to make our hearts burn with the Holy Spirit. When you hear the news of the resurrection, your heart burns with joy. When you taste the forgiveness of sins with your lips and digest the words spoken, your heart burns with relief for an overwhelming debt paid. And when God answers your “we were hoping” with “this is truth”, your heart burns with the sure hope that the world cannot define, let alone know. This is our Easter hope. Amen.