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Luke 24:13-35

EASTER GRAMMAR

I grew up with a grammar nerd. My mother is a grammar nerd. Maybe some of you can relate to what it is like to live with a grammar nerd. We know in our family that if we are at an event and the speaker makes a grammatical mistake, we can expect to hear my mother utter a low but audible groan. Grammar nerds find grammar mistakes almost painful.

Grammar is not a favorite subject for most school children. How many of you grew up enduring the agony of having to diagram sentences in school? You could not find a drier, more boring subject on the planet. And yet, and yet grammar matters. Grammar makes a difference. Take this sentence for example: "I'm sorry, (*comma*) I love you." Now, if you eliminate the comma, if you make that one tiny change, you have a sentence that means something radically different: "I'm sorry I love you." Grammar matters.

And grammar matters to the Easter message. In fact, grammar is essential to our grasp of the good news of Easter.

It's the afternoon of Easter. Two of the disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus. They are discussing all the things that took place to Jesus over the past few days, trying to make sense of what had happened. And then a stranger joins them. They don't know yet that this stranger is in fact Jesus. This stranger doesn't seem to know about the events that had just taken place in Jerusalem, so the two disciples tell him about Jesus who was a great prophet and teacher, how he had been so meaningful to them, and then about his arrest and his horrible death. And then the disciples acknowledge something. They tell this stranger, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

We had hoped. It's the Greek imperfect tense that is used here: *we had hoped*. It suggests a past action that was continuous in nature. This hope had grown and developed within the hearts of the disciples over time. We might imagine how this hope grew as they listened to his compelling teachings about God, as they witnessed Jesus' healing the sick, as they saw him feed the hungry, as he as he inspired even the most ordinary among them to feel empowered with God's love. Gradually this hope that he was the one to redeem Israel grew within them.

But the grammar of this phrase, *we had hoped*, also reveals that this hope has now come to a crashing end. The events of the past days in Jerusalem have ended this habit of hoping. *We had hoped* speaks of a future that is not to be, of a hope that is not to be realized. And it leaves behind a gaping hole of what could have been.

This is where Easter finds the disciples. And this is where Easter finds many of us-- living with the reality of disappointment, living with the imperfect tense: we had hoped.

We had hoped on that sunny day long ago, that our marriage would last until death do us part. We had hoped.

We had hoped that the treatments were working.

We had hoped that he would get the job.

We had hoped that her addiction had been conquered for good.

We had hoped that we would finally have time to spend together and travel after retirement.

We had hoped to have children.

We had hoped that the new church growth program would revive our congregation.

We had hoped when we were younger that we might become a doctor, an artist, a writer.

We had hoped for better things for ourselves and our life.

But things happened. And our hopes collapsed, leaving behind a gaping hole of what could have been.

Easter begins with broken hearts and broken dreams and broken lives. Later, later the disciples will recall how their hearts burned within them as Jesus, the stranger, walked with them. Later they will know the joy of the burning hearts and the risen Jesus. But before the *burning* hearts, Easter begins with *broken* hearts. The grammar of *we had hoped*, this imperfect tense, tells the painful story of our human story of disappointment and loss and sorrow.

We are not comfortable with the reality of disappointment. And so often we will rush to embrace the future tense. When I was in college my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was greatly troubled by this news and I recall a well-intentioned friend reassuring me, "Don't worry. Everything will be alright." Now how in the world could she make such a promise? Was she clairvoyant? Did she have some crystal ball? In our discomfort with human suffering, we sometimes try to rush other people who are dealing with hardships into the future tense. Imagine how it would feel if someone who was suffering were to tell us honestly, "I am *not* alright and I can't imagine ever being alright again." It is hard to hear such pain. We want to move people and ourselves past this difficult time of pain as quickly as we can, and so sometimes we move into the future tense too quickly.

But we had hoped. That's the reality of many people. *We had hoped*. Easter does not come to push aside that pain with some kind of superficial happy clappy joy. Easter *speaks* to that deep pain, that deep disappointment, to our lives held hostage by the imperfect tense of *we had hoped*. Because instead of pushing aside our pain, the Resurrection is about God *entering* our pain and lifting us to a different kind of life.

The Resurrection has its own interesting grammar. Consider the traditional Christian affirmation of the Resurrection. On Easter we affirm: Christ is risen! You will sometimes hear people say "Christ *has* risen," but that is not the traditional Christian affirmation. Christ *has* risen implies a completed past action. But the Christian affirmation is: "Christ *is* risen" which emphasizes the present state of a past action. Theologically, we Christians embrace this strange sentence construction of "Christ is risen" because it speaks the truth we believe: that the Resurrection is not just a past event long ago but is also a present reality and a future hope. The Resurrection mixes up our grammar just as it mixes up the events of our lives so we think about life in a new way.

Ok, it's time for a bad grammar joke. "The past, the present, and the future walk into a bar. It was tense."

A dumb joke, yes, but it is relevant to Easter. The Resurrection good news involves our holding in tension the past, the present, and the future. The Resurrection defies our linguistic abilities to speak about it in grammatically sensible ways and defies our ability to neatly categorized our lives into the past, present or future. We cannot separate *we had hoped*, the imperfect tense of disappointment and loss, from *Christ is risen*. There is joyful news that Christ is risen. But it grows out of the painful reality of *we had hoped*. And the two live together, intertwined.

I wonder if you have ever had that experience yourself, of the two realities living intertwined within you--of carrying a heavy burden within your heart, a heavy disappointment or sorrow, *we had hoped*, but you kept getting out of bed each day and carrying on, and living and loving, because you also believed *Christ is risen*. They butt up against each other in life: *we had*

hoped and *Christ is risen*. *Christ is risen* does not make the pain all go away. It just refocuses our eyes and hearts to see what God is doing in the midst of the realities in which we live.

Royce and Keri Young were thrilled to learn that Keri was pregnant with a baby girl. They named her Eva and began to plan for her to join their family, as they dreamed of who she might be and how she would become a sister to their young son. But in the course of the pregnancy they received unthinkable news. Eva did not have a brain, a rare abnormality that meant she would not live long after birth. Royce and Keri were crushed by this news. All their "we had hoped" for their daughter collapsed.

But then the couple made a decision that surprised even their doctor. Instead of terminating the pregnancy, Royce and Keri decided to carry the child to term so that they could donate her organs to another child in need. They decided to participate in a resurrection activity. It was not an easy process, this gift they offered. This resurrection activity they chose to participate in meant that they constantly lived with the reality of their crushing disappointment and loss. Every time the baby kicked or rolled over within her, every time Keri's back hurt or her feet got sore, all the normal pregnancy woes that generally result in a joyful outcome, all these reminded Keri that the baby she was carrying would die. And when they went to the hospital to give birth, they knew they would not be coming home with their child.

Royce and Keri found joy in knowing that Eva's life would make life possible for others. But that knowledge never eradicated their crushing disappointment. Royce reflected that: "A lot of people say things like, 'I wouldn't change anything' after a trying circumstance, but I'm not about to say that. I would definitely change this if I could. I want my daughter to be perfect. I want her to blow out her candles on her first birthday. I want to watch her bang her head on our

coffee table trying to learn to walk. I want her to run up a cell phone bill texting boys. I want to walk her down an aisle. I want to change it all so badly. But I can't. This is our reality."

Easter has its own strange grammar, where *we had hoped* meets up with *Christ is risen*. Past, present, and future realities live in tension with the life-giving news of God's love. As Easter people, we affirm that grammar makes a difference.