

One of the most disorienting experiences in life is when our future doesn't turn out the way we thought it would.

Not ONLY because something went wrong— but also suddenly, the story you were living in... doesn't make sense anymore.

And you're left trying to figure out: where do I go from here?

Maybe it's the person you thought you'd grow old with...and they're no longer there.

Maybe it's a job you counted on...or a version of your life you were building toward.

And it's not only the loss itself—it's the loss of the future you had attached to it.

There's a phrase in today's scripture that captures that feeling perfectly.

The disciples say: "We had hoped..."

We had hoped he was going to redeem Israel.

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We had hoped things would turn out differently.

We had hoped to be further along by now.

We had hoped that relationship would last.

We had hoped things would feel better by now.

We had hoped the world would be different.

We had hoped...

It's such a small phrase. But it carries so much.

Because when we say "we had hoped,"

we're not just naming disappointment—

we're naming the loss of a future we thought we were walking toward.

It's like setting out on a long journey—knowing where you're going, imagining what it will be like when you finally arrive.

You can see it in your mind. You've built your life around it.

And then...
somewhere along the way...
you realize you're not going to get there.

The road changes.
The path disappears.
The destination is no longer possible.

And you're still walking—

but now you don't know where you're going.

And it's not just that you feel sad—

you feel disoriented.

Like you're not sure where you are in the story anymore—

or even what story you're in.

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And that's exactly where this story begins.

Its a few days after the empty tomb. So after the crucifixion, But also after Easter.

Two disciples, walking down a road to a place called Emmaus.

It's about seven miles from Jerusalem— We don't walk down to places anymore. Much less 7 miles. But the 2 of them are walking back home.

they are walking away.

Away from Jerusalem.
Away from everything that just happened.

Talking.
Replaying it.
Trying to understand.

“What just happened?” Their leader had been killed. And I mean yes the world on the street was the tomb was now empty and some are claiming he is alive. But either way it feels like the empire won. The grief feels like defeat...

It's like a kid on a playground who's been taught to do the right thing—

to stand up for others,
to be kind,
to take the high road.

And so they do.

They step in.
They say something.
They try to make it right.

And instead of things getting better... they end up on the outside.

They walk away feeling small.

And there's this quiet confusion: I did what I was supposed to do...

so why does it feel like I lost?

That's where they are.

Yes—there are whispers that the tomb is empty.

But what they have seen
still feels like defeat.

Their leader is gone.

And the empire...still looks like it won.

“What do we do now?”

“We had hoped he was going to redeem Israel.”



And I don't think they say it lightly.

I think there's weight in it.

Because just days before...
they had watched him enter Jerusalem.

Hope rising in their chest.

Everything they believed...
everything they had given their lives to...it felt like it was finally happening.

The Messiah had come. Redemption was here. Things were about to
change. He was going to change their situation



And then...
everything fell apart.

Crucifixion.

Public. Violent.

And then silence.

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So when they say, “We had hoped...”
what they’re really saying is:

“We thought we knew what God was doing...and now we don’t.”

“We thought we knew how this story was going to end...and now it doesn’t
make sense anymore.”
Is it all meaningless?

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And so they walk.

Trying to reconcile what they thought was happening with what actually
happened.

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And as they walk...
Jesus comes alongside them.

He just starts walking with them.

Not interrupting.
Not correcting.
Just... present and listening

□

Now we as the readers know that they don’t recognize him.

Jesus shows up...
but they don’t recognize him.

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And maybe that's the most striking part of the story.

Not that Jesus was absent— but that he was present, and they couldn't see it.

Now I don't think it's because they weren't paying attention.

I think it's because their expectations were shaping what they were able to see.

They had a picture of what the Messiah was supposed to be.

Powerful.

Victorious.

Obvious.

A Messiah who would fix things.

A Messiah who would restore what was broken.

A Messiah who would make everything make sense again.

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And this—this didn't match.

A crucified Messiah didn't fit their vision.

A suffering Savior? I thought being savior implied the opposite

And so they couldn't recognize him.

And if we're honest... we do this too.

We attach God to the future we expect.

We imagine how life is supposed to go—how things are supposed to turn out—what God should do.

We assume that if God is present, life will unfold a certain way.

That we'll be protected from certain losses.

Spared from certain pain.

Kept from certain disruptions.

I have to be honest...

I used to think that if I could just be certain enough about what God wanted from me—

if I could just make the right choices,
be faithful enough,
do what I believed God was asking—

then I could avoid failure.

Avoid heartache.
Avoid suffering.

And if I'm really honest, that's why I felt so much pressure to get it right.

Because I thought if I followed God closely enough...things would turn out the way they were supposed to.

But that isn't how Christ shows up.

Because sometimes you can be faithful—and things still fall apart.

Sometimes you can do the right thing— and it still doesn't lead where you thought it would.

And when that happens...

we don't always know how to recognize that God is still present.

And maybe you've had moments like that—

where you can look back now and see that something was there...

but at the time, you couldn't see it at all.

Maybe it was a kind of strength you didn't know you had.

Or a sense of peace that didn't make sense in the moment.

Or a person who was showing up for you in ways you didn't fully recognize.

Sometimes presence is only recognizable in hindsight.

And sometimes what feels like absence... is actually presence we don't yet know how to see.

And so Jesus walks with them.

And he listens.

He lets them tell the story as they understand it.

And then...he begins to tell it differently.

Not by undoing what happened.

Not by fixing the past.

But by reframing it.



He begins with Moses and the prophets—and he walks them back through the story.

Showing them that what felt like the end...was never the end.

That what looked like failure...was not outside of God's work.

That even this—even the cross—could be held inside something larger.



And somewhere along the road...something begins to shift.

They don't recognize him yet.

But later they will say:

"Were not our hearts burning within us..."



Something in them knew...before they could name it.

Before they could see it. That maybe the story wasn't over.



When they get to their destination they all sit down to eat together.



And it's there—not on the road, not in the explanation, but at the table...

He takes the bread.

Blesses it.

Breaks it.

Gives it to them.

And suddenly— their eyes are opened.

And they recognize him.

Not because their circumstances changed.

Not because everything suddenly made sense.

But because in that moment—in something ordinary, familiar, embodied—
they encounter his presence.

And then he's gone.

And they turn to each other and say:

“Were not our hearts burning within us...?”

The story we thought was over...is still unfolding.

The presence we thought was absent...has been there all along.

And maybe the invitation of this story is this:

Not to have everything figured out.

Not to force clarity.

But to stay open.

To keep walking.

To pay attention.



Because sometimes hope is restored in the breaking of bread.

This last week I was at a conference at Yale, Public Theology and Public Policy. I went with a Joel a friend from seminary who is serving a church in Taylorsville, and Aurrita, and older lady who has just become a pastor in the AME Zion tradition, and is serving her first church in Mocksville.

The second night I found myself sitting around a dinner table—

with people whose lives had taken very different paths,
and somehow, for that one evening, had all come together.

Someone I ran into from undergrad Brevard College, that is now serving a methodist church in New Haven, CT which is there next door to Yale. There was a Yale divinity student that I met last summer at the protest in D.C. Whom had kept in touch. I learned this time of reconnecting with her that she had been adopted out of foster care. So it was her, and then a few of her divinity school classmates. We were joined by a person from Philly, who'd recently been a professor at UPenn and has just taken a new job at a foundation, A Chaplin at a University in SC.

And as we sat there, sharing a meal, telling pieces of our lives...

there was this quiet moment where I realized—

this is it. This kind of connection, and presence.

These are the moments that make life vibrant, hopefully, purposeful.

I mean this was the same day that the President of the US had posted an AI generated image of him as Jesus and was also publicly disparaging the Pope.

And the cross didn't look like redemption.

It looked like loss.

It looked like failure.

It looked like the empire had won.

But what the cross reveals—

is that God was never found in that kind of power to begin with.

To trust that even in disorientation...

even in the middle of a story that doesn't make sense...

Christ is still drawing near.

The cross and the empty tomb reveals that God is not found in the power that crushes—

but in the love that refuses to.

□

And maybe, just maybe—

somewhere between the road
and the table...

between disappointment and recognition...
hope will find us again.