

## When Hope Flags, Hope Comes

Luke 24:13-27, I Kings 19:9-14

Today is the third Sunday of Easter, right in the middle of the season of Eastertide. Long ago the church said, Easter is too huge to be confined to one Sunday, so we have seven Sundays up to Pentecost. During these weeks I will be joining resurrection appearance texts with our lives today.

Today's sermon is about hope, hope as a gift of the Resurrection. The title is: "When Hope Flags, Hope Comes." There are days when hope flags, hope about ourselves and the world around us. Sometimes hope seems almost to have vanished. Both of our texts today are about the coming of new hope.

### I

In Luke's Easter gospel the women come to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. Luke names three: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary, mother of James, and *other women* who had followed Jesus from Galilee! A crowd of faithful women! When they get there and see the stone removed they go in and see no body there. The two men in dazzling array appear and tell them the news of Jesus resurrection. I love their sly question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Do angels wink?

The women go to tell the eleven disciples the news of Easter, and the disciples didn't believe them and thought it an "idle tale". Any surprise here?

But the risen Christ was on the move and Luke gives us this story unique to his gospel. Two disciples, one unnamed, the other named Cleopas were trudging along the road to Emmaus. It was late that Sunday afternoon and their hearts and feet were heavy with grief. The text describes them as *sad*. Don't you just feel *sad* somedays? It can overcome us.

Then Jesus came up and walked along with them. He appeared incognito, as he often does in his resurrection appearances, as he often does today as well.

Jesus asked them, "What are you two guys talking about?" Cleopas says, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened there?" Now Jesus may be winking at us. He was the only one who *did* know what had happened.

Then they relayed the news about Jesus' death. "We had hoped", they said to him, "that he was the one who would redeem Israel." Are there any sadder words than these, "we had hoped."

Then Jesus tried to open to them scripture about himself, beginning with the Torah, and going through the Prophets. They still didn't recognize him; they

still did not believe. (That gives us preachers a little hope. Somedays Jesus himself couldn't get through to his listeners!)

Then eventide came and as the sun set, they arrived at Emmaus. Jesus appeared to be going on, but they invited him to join them for the evening meal and a night's rest. They were following the rules of hospitality of the time. But had Jesus begun to move their hearts a bit toward recognition?

Then as they had supper together Jesus the guest became Jesus the *host*! And then four actions they had seen Jesus do over and over again. He *took* the bread, and *blessed* it, and *broke* it, and *gave* it to them. Taking, blessing, breaking, giving. *Then* their eyes were opened, and they knew who he was. And just as suddenly, Jesus vanished from their sight, on to other places he wanted to go, others he wanted to see.

Sometimes Easter takes a little time to take in, a little while for us to recognize Jesus and what has happened. Like the old Polaroid cameras that took a while for the picture to develop before our eyes.

Sometimes we need to ask hope for dinner so it can stay awhile, long enough for us to recognize it, for the ears of our ears to be unstopped and the eyes of our eyes to be opened, as the poet phrased it.

But it happens. Hope happens, Easter happens. Brother David Steindler-Rost has opened my own eyes to hope. Hope, he writes, is *openness to surprise!*<sup>1</sup> We haven't shut the door to what God can do and life can bring. God wants to give us surprisable hearts!

And he also writes this. Hope is different from *hopes*. Hopes are specific things we want to happen, but hope is a deeper thing, the thing that endures. Hopes can be disappointed, but hope never disappoints. Hopes can be dashed, but hope keeps us going, moving with surprisable hearts. The two disciples said "We had hoped", and their hopes were about something specific, Jesus rescuing and redeeming Israel. But Jesus had a deeper hope to bring, beyond their hopes.

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers", Emily Dickinson wrote,

That perches in the soul—

And sings the tune without the words—

And never stops—at all—<sup>2</sup>

Hopes are like the words we assign to the things we wish for. But hope is like the bird which perches in our souls and sings the tune, without the words, beyond the words.

That's the kind of hope Easter brings.

Now to the story in the Hebrew Scriptures about Elijah. His name came to personify all the prophets. And today's text is one of the most luminous in scripture. It is about hope overcoming disappointment and despair.

A little back story. Elijah had waged a battle with the prophets and priests of Baal at Mount Carmel and won in dramatic fashion. It's easy to believe in times like that, when God seems so present and life is so good. But then he heard that Queen Jezebel, who was a follower of Baal, was out capture him and have his head.

And Elijah fled, fled in fear and despair. He decided to flee to Mount Horeb, also called Sinai, where God had given to Moses the Ten Commandments. He needed a little reassurance from God. *En route*, he stopped to rest under a juniper tree, but his mind could not rest. He cried out his disappointment and despair to God: It is enough! He cried, praying that he might die. He is not alone in that feeling is he? Uncountable are the many who have prayed that prayer. Some of us have prayed some form of that prayer.

But God intervened and grace came in the form of food and sleep. Elijah slept under the juniper tree until an angel touched him and said, arise and eat. And Elijah saw a cake baked on hot stones and a jug of water. He ate and drank and lay down again in the gift of sleep. Later, the angel again came and offered him cakes and water.

Nourished and rested, Elijah walked on to Mount Horeb, climbed to the top and spent the night in a cave.

Yahweh the Lord came to him and said, “Why are you here Elijah?” Good therapists often begin by asking a person who has come for help, why are you here? And, why are you here *now*?

Elijah lets out his despair in a torrent of words: “I am zealous for you Yahweh. Your people have forsaken your Covenant and torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword and *I alone* am left! Now they’re after me!”

God told him to leave the cave and stand on the mountain before the Lord.

What happened next was something Elijah never would have imagined. In the spare strangeness of the Hebrew words here is what happened:

And there was a mighty wind,

Not in the wind was Yahweh.

And after the wind an earthquake

Not in the earthquake was Yahweh.

And after the earthquake fire.

Yahweh was not in the fire.

And after the fire

The sound of crushed silence.

Three Hebrew words. Voice, silence, crush.

We've often heard it translated "a still small voice." That's too tame, a cliché. The Jewish Study Bible translates it: "a soft murmuring sound."

It was something unexpected, new. Wind, earthquake, fire were the ways God had acted in the past, not only to Elijah but to all the Hebrew people. But God was not there in these forms. What do we do when all the ways we have expected, waited for and experienced God no longer work?

But Elijah experienced the presence of God in the silence of God, the stillness of God. And he covered his face with his cloak. Through the years, mystics have written about the presence of God in the silence of God, of the dark nights of the soul which birth a new life in the Spirit of God. That happened to Elijah.

Then God spoke from the silence. First God gave him a commission, a call, something to *do*. This is sometimes a grace for us too. Next God gave him a reassurance. Elijah had cried "*I alone am left!*" Sometimes that is how we feel. And we get discouraged to the point of despair. And here is the reassurance God spoke:

There are seven thousand in Israel who have never bent their knees to Baal nor kissed his lips!

“Don’t get all morose and gloomy. Look around! There are all kinds of people around who’ve not given themselves over to the glittering false gods of the world!”

Where do you need hope the most today? In your