

**Sermon - Easter 3, Year A - The Road to Emmaus**  
**Luke 24:13-35**  
**4/23/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the past two years, I've had the great privilege of Sunday school to teenagers. At the end of our forty-five minutes together, we would all gather up our materials, tidy the room, and sit together around a large table to pray. Our formula was simple: begin with the Collect of the day – read aloud by a volunteer of varied degrees of enthusiasm – and then contemplate the following: What am I grateful for? For whom would I like to pray today? What am I worried about? And: where did I see Jesus this week?

The prayers of the teenagers surprised and delighted me every session. The first three questions inspired prayers someone might expect: “ I am grateful for my parents. For my friends. For the new Pokemon game. I would like to pray for my grandpa, for my teacher, for my sister. I am worried about my math test. About climate change. About the people who don't have homes.”

But the answers that moved me the most were always the prayers that the group offered when I asked them where they had seen Jesus this week. When we first began to meet together, they were unsure about this question. “Um. At church.” They would say. Right. Very good. But as the year went on, there seemed to be a deepening of their attentiveness. Around Christmas time, a young woman shared that she had seen Jesus in the birth of her nephew after the dangerous night of her sister's labor. A week later, one of the boys recalled feeling Jesus alongside him as he stood up for someone being bullied. The weeks wore on, and the stories kept coming – all of them bright and ripe with prayer.

I have no illusion that I, as some rare teacher, instructed them in some science or art of perception. We were all in this offering of prayer together. Something broke open within us as

we trained ourselves to see more with our hearts than with our eyes. We weren't looking for things that weren't actually there, but instead we were becoming better at seeing what was true.

This question of perception is central the twenty-fourth chapter from the Gospel of St. Luke. We encounter two disciples making their way along the road to a town called Emmaus. Luke is a wonderful storyteller - truly the master of delicious detail and hymnic text - Luke, of course, gives us the Magnificat and the Benedictus and most of what we recognize as the Christmas story. And so Luke does not withhold detail. Two disciples, Cleopas and his companion, are walking away from Jerusalem, west to another town, when a stranger approaches them. Luke doesn't leave us in the dark – this stranger is Jesus. Last Sunday, I mentioned how the events of Thomas doubting the Resurrection of our Lord and then meeting him as he comes through the walls of the upper room – all of that occurred on the afternoon of Easter Sunday, and here in this passage, we still find ourselves on the very same day.

But when Jesus meets the two disciples, they do not yet perceive that it is him. The text is cryptic: we read that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” The passage tells us that “they stood still, looking sad.” “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?” they ask, to – in fact – the only one in Jerusalem who properly *does* know the things that have taken place. And then their aching revelation: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Into the dusk of the long road west of Jerusalem, the disciples speak three of the most heartbreaking words of the human condition: “we had hoped.” We had hoped that this one would be the treatment that worked. We had hoped that a baby would come by summer. We had hoped that our child would come back to church with us. We had hoped that this relationship would be the one that worked out. We had hoped that this man – this prophet and teacher and friend – we had hoped that this was going to be the new beginning... These three words do quite a bit of work

linguistically, because of course we don't even need to add another sentence to understand the meaning of the second part: "We had hoped...but... it didn't. But we weren't. We couldn't. He wasn't." These are words that stop us – still and sad – on the unknown road.

Notice, though, what Jesus does. He walks with them. He meets them precisely where they are. He does not immediately turn them around back toward Jerusalem, but instead accompanies them, listens to them, breaks open the scriptures for them, and waits for an invitation to share their meal. How remarkable that the greatest change in perception comes at a table of travelers breaking bread.

There is something revelatory in this breaking of this bread. In Luke's Gospel, food and drink and hospitality are of paramount importance. The text describes Jesus sharing seven meals before his crucifixion. In the Bible, we remember that the number seven is a holy number. It symbolizes the seven days of Creation. It is a mark of something being complete. And so there are seven stories of meals before Jesus is put to death and each meal teaches us something about who Jesus is and what his kingdom will look like when it is brought to fulfillment.

First, he shares a meal with Levi the tax collector, a radical and dangerous sign of his willingness to spend time with people that respectable society considers unsavory. Second, he shares a meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee, the meal where a young woman washes his feet with her hair. Third, Jesus feeds five thousand people on the hillside, multiplying, like Moses, the bread in the wilderness. His fourth and fifth meals are also at the homes of pharisees, and it is here that the old notions of purity are enlivened with new freshness. The sixth meal is at the house of Zaccheus, the man who climbed the tree to see Jesus walking along the road. Jesus' seventh meal is the Last Supper, the final assembly of his disciples where he offers his own Body and Blood as the Bread of Life.

And so when Jesus meets the two wanderers on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter day, the bread he breaks with them is his eighth meal. In the book of Genesis, the 8th day is the first day of the New Creation. Here, in Emmaus, this is the first *meal* of the New Creation. It is the meal at which all of the other lessons that had been taught at his table became truly revealed. It is around this table where the disciples are at last able to recognize Jesus in the fullness of his Resurrected life. At last, they are not looking for something that is not there, but are instead beholding the source and summit of everything that is true.

It is true, too, that *our* capacities for recognizing Jesus are often limited by our own expectations. Perhaps, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are limited by what we had hoped for. We “had hoped” for things to be and look and feel a certain way, and when they disappoint us, we don’t want to look at them. Perhaps, like the disciples, we have kept our gaze fixed too firmly on the past, eyeing the city of our former years as they disappear over our shoulder. Perhaps we expect to find Jesus in church, but we haven’t been too attentive to the continual ways he appears to us in our neighbors, our challenges, our families, or wherever we are along the road. We try to see him on our own terms, folding our arms across our chest instead of opening our hands to receive the Bread that teaches us to encounter Jesus on his.

But the Gospel, as always, meets us with blessing. Just as Jesus met his disciples in their sadness and confusion and need, so too does he meet each one of us. Without condemnation or anger, he asks *us* what we are speaking about and where we are going. He breaks open the scriptures for us – here, today. He inspires our own hearts to burn brightly within us, and at the end of the day, he meets us at his own table. It is our blessing to receive him there, in Word and Sacrament. We take, bless, break, and give – perceiving his perfect grace in all creation.