

“Living Hope for Lost Hearts”

Introduction: Although we may have a number of questions about the resurrection of Jesus, one of the things we can say for sure is that one day is not nearly enough for us to explore this greatest of mysteries, and reflect on its implications for our lives. What does it mean to live in a world where resurrection has happened? Given that the next great event in our faith—ascension—is separated from Easter by forty days, it’s as if God has intentionally given us a whole season to reflect on this before we move on (cf. Ac. 1:3).

To get us started, over the next few Sundays, we will look at some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, beginning with the very afternoon of that first Easter day. As we consider these appearances, it’s worth noticing that the people Jesus appeared to were not those who had been celebrating his death. He could’ve gone to those who’d mocked him, whipped him, and nailed him to the cross, and done some significant damage of his own in return. Had it been me, I’m forced to admit that such would have been tempting! However, instead, Jesus chose to spend his time with those who were drowning in a sea of despair and discouragement. He met with those who, frankly, on the road of life, had lost all hope. His loving desire was to come alongside them and care for them in those places where they felt weak and vulnerable, where their souls were, as the psalmist put it, “downcast” (Ps. 42). As we might put it today, they were all suffering from post-traumatic stress as they tried to process the horrible event of crucifixion they had witnessed.

Where might your soul be downcast as you listen in today? Where might your hope be waning? Where might you need Jesus to come alongside you and simply be with you, in the midst of broken dreams?

I. A Story of Broken Dreams

A. We meet these two travelers (perhaps a husband and wife) as they are making their way back to their home in a village called Emmaus. They had spent the weekend in Jerusalem. They had gone, most likely, to engage in some kind of religious retreat during the festival of Passover. But things had gone horribly and desperately wrong. Jesus, the one in whom they had placed all their hope, had been arrested, sentenced to death in a mock trial, and put to death in a humiliating fashion reserved only for the worst of criminals. That had happened Friday. On Saturday they had remained in the city in observance of the Sabbath, and now, on Sunday, were making their way back home, trying as they went to digest these events.

B. As they were trudging along, a traveler joined them. We’re told that they were kept from recognizing him. Possibly this was because their minds were still lost in a fog of grief. Possibly as well is the fact that in his post-resurrection state, Jesus looked just a bit different than he had before. It may also have been, as we look back from the end of the text when they finally do recognize him, that they hadn’t yet understood the necessity of his death. None of us, actually, will see him clearly until we do.

C. Before we get to that point, Jesus simply invites conversation, seeking to draw them out, by asking a question: “What are you discussing as you walk along?” In response, we find that they couldn’t believe Jesus knew nothing about the events of the past weekend, how this powerful one in word and deed had been killed on a tree. As they explained it to him, they also shared how their hopes and dreams had been shattered: “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

What a difficult thing it is to feel like your hopes and dreams have come to an end. We don't have to look very hard to see so many struggling with this today. This virus, and its effects, have caused dreams to die and hope for the future to wear thin. I think of just one example of a young woman in NH who invested her life savings last year to open a graphic design and printing shop. Things were going well and she hired her first employee in January. Then the virus hit, and sales dropped from \$20k per month to \$1.5k. She recently had to let her employee go and is not so sure how much longer she can last. And then there are all the graduating seniors, in high school, college, and even graduate school, whose hopes and dreams of a future have collapsed. Or, on the other end of life, those who had hoped to retire but now cannot. Whatever we have lost, such loss can leave us bitter, discouraged, depressed.

These are places where we need to have Jesus meet us, to come alongside us, to hear him invite us to share with him our emotions, to have him help us try to make some sense out of that which doesn't.

D. This is what Jesus did for these two despondent and discouraged travelers. They had hoped that this one who they had thought to be the Messiah would come and liberate the Jewish nation from its pagan oppressors. They were anticipating a Messiah who would take it to those Roman soldiers, not one who would just hang there and allow the soldiers to take it to him. What kind of wimpy Messiah was that?! And so they were heading home, back to their big screen TV's, their computer games, their refrigerators, and all of the other things we can turn to as we try to cope.

## II. The Story of Living Hope

A. But Jesus had a better idea. Into this story of broken dreams and lost hope, Jesus layers a larger story of living hope. Jesus begins, notice, by affirming, just by asking them questions, their desire for a better world. They know, as we know, that all is not right. Suffering, oppression, violence, death, are all around us. So, starting with "Moses," which stands for the first five books of the Bible, Jesus most likely reminded them that it wasn't meant to be this way. God, in fact, had created a good, wonderful world in which everything was designed to be in harmony with everything else. It was a world in which human beings were given the role of bearing the image of God, that is, to steward well over all that God had entrusted into our care. This could only take place under his good guidance and direction.

B. Sadly, humanity decided it wanted to be fully in charge and to use the creation and everyone in it for our own benefit instead of the intended design and purpose of serving each other. In the process, our relationships with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves, and with creation, became broken. It's the natural outcome when we insist on living for ourselves. Gratefully, God loves the world too much to leave it that way. He came in Jesus, the one to whom the prophets point, and started a resistance movement, a revolution of sorts, enabling the kingdom of heaven to begin to break into the kingdom of earth. It was never intended to be an armed conflict in which the love of power dominates, but a conflict in which the power of love wins out over evil. To do this, Jesus allowed himself to become the Messiah who suffers, his death necessary to bear the fruit of new life. We could say that this happened as he became infected with our disease, absorbing the sin and evil and death in the world onto himself. But he comes back to life (as he is in the process of revealing to these two!), overcoming the disease and offering his immunity to us. We can now experience our various relationships being restored (coming back together after a time of unnatural distancing?) and being sent out to heal. We will still have earthly trials, but they are not the end. Our lost hope will not have the last word.

C. I'm not sure if Jesus taught it exactly this way, but it's the general outline we find as we follow Moses and the Prophets and the ministry of Jesus from his life, to his death and resurrection, to his ascension and coming again. Certainly, it was a lot to take in. The travelers were tired, Jesus was probably tired (what a weekend retreat he had!), and, since it was late in the day, the travelers urged Jesus to stay with them. As they were sitting around their table, ready to break bread together, Jesus, the guest, became the host. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and began to give it to them. As he did so, suddenly they recognized him. The "penny dropped" and what had been burning in their hearts as he had taught them sunk in. Though he disappeared from their sight, probably an indication that their relationship with him going forward would not be physical but something far different, they were still filled with joy and raced back to Jerusalem to share the good news of what they were processing.

A few years ago someone shared with Rama that, because of certain things that had been going on in this person's life, it felt like she was in a dark tunnel and could not see any light at the end. Rama's response was wise (as it typically is!). She said, "Have you considered that the light might not be at the end of the tunnel but right in the middle of it, with you?"

That's where these travelers had begun the day, somewhere in the middle of a dark tunnel of lost hope and broken dreams, the valley of the shadow of death. What they discovered is that, because of the resurrection, Jesus was right there in the middle with them. The light had come into the world; darkness had taken its best shot, but could not overcome it. The road ahead may still be hard, but it is not a road we take alone, nor is it a road that leads to death. Instead, it is a road that leads to resurrection life, beginning now, and extending right on into the eternity of new creation. May Jesus meet you there, now, in the middle, and help you to take just the next few steps.