

Third Sunday of Easter

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Jesus is dead. We saw him die.

Ok, we didn't see him die, but some of the others did. He had been talking about his death for a while. It made some of us pretty uncomfortable.

But he always said he'd rise again on the third day. That somehow, he would beat death. But he died three days ago, and here we are. No one's seen him. I guess some of the women said his tomb was empty and some strange men told them that Jesus was raised – but if that were true, why hasn't he shown himself to anyone? Seems like more wishful thinking to me.

Jesus is dead. We thought he was someone special, but he was just human after all.

So now Cleopas and I are heading back home to Emmaus. We left Jerusalem in silence, both too upset to speak, both knowing what the other was thinking. Finally, I broke the silence.

“I just thought he was the one,” I said. “I thought, I hoped, that he would be the one who would change things. The way he stood up to the

Romans, to the Temple authorities, I thought he could actually make a difference.”

Cleopas looked at me and nodded. “But Rome always wins, doesn’t it? They killed him just like every other troublemaker. I had hoped that Jesus would change things too, but we should have known better. Things don’t change. Empires change, chief priests change, but everything stays the same. How could one man change that?”

“I know,” I replied. “He kept talking about this Kingdom of God coming soon. I guess I expected, well, a new kingdom! A new reality where disease, oppression, and hunger were things of the past. Where we would be free. Guess not that’s happening...”

And just as I was saying this, a man walked up to us. Where did he come from? I thought we were alone on this road. Then he began to speak to us...

“We had hoped,” the disciples said. They had hoped for freedom, for justice, to be equal in the Kingdom of God. They had followed and listened to Jesus for a long time, hoping that he was the one, and then on that Friday, they saw their hopes nailed to a Roman cross. They saw their hope die.

Even the way they say it, “we had hoped,” tells us that this hope that the disciples had, that Jesus would “redeem Israel” was now in the past – that it must be left behind. After all, it had been three days since Jesus’ death and

there was no indication in their mind that Jesus had risen like he had said he would.

Personally? I totally get where the disciples are coming from here. I'm sure we each could name a litany of hopes that have been crushed – disappointments that reorder our lives and our visions of the future.

'I had hoped that that she would be the one.'

'I had hoped I would find my dream job by now.'

'I had hoped that the test could come back clear.'

'I had hoped to tell him that I love him one last time.'

I bet that each of us has lived with fear and uncertainty and doubt. Lived with hopes that are no longer possible both in our personal and our communal lives. And we live with hopes for the future, unrealized and impossibly distant.

'We had hoped that the Kingdom of God would reign on earth as it is in heaven.'

'We had hoped that poverty would be a thing of the past.'

'We had hoped that war would cease. That the environment would be saved. That love would trump hate.'

'We had hoped that the resurrection would really change things.'

All too often, our hopes seem to die to the realities of this world.

The racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and systemic injustices that surround us weigh us down. The corruption in government, the murder

of innocent people, and the billions of dollars set to be spent on a wall instead of healthcare. The fear, the anxiety, the uncertainty of the world around us drowns out the hope we have for a better world – for the reality of God’s reign of love, justice, and peace that seems so far out of reach.

And when our hope dies, we so often feel confused, helpless, alone.

And after yet another Easter Sunday that has not dramatically altered the realities of this world, we are left to wonder: where is the resurrection in the face of all this? How does the resurrection matter today, outside these walls, outside this festival liturgy? What does the resurrection mean to those who have lost their hope?

Like the disciples that first Easter evening, we walk the road surrounded by doubt, surrounded by grief, with our hopes dashed.

But as we heard, these travelers are not alone.

Even though they do not recognize him, the living Christ comes to them, walks with them in their grief, and speaks to them.

He reminds them of God’s history with God’s people. How God never abandoned Israel but continued to journey with them. From Abraham, to Moses, to Ruth, to David, to Esther. In the belly of the whale and in the fiery furnace. In slavery and in exile and in domination, God was with God’s people. And Jesus reminds them that through his own life, the fullness of God intimately walked with God’s people and continues to do so. Christ reminds

these wary sojourners that they are not alone in their grief or in their hopes for a better world. And by showing them God's long history with God's people, Jesus reminds these travelers, reminds us, that we can trust in God's promises – we can trust in the resurrection.

Perhaps that is the power of the resurrection – that it's God's faithfulness to us in spite of the world's attempts to crush our hopes. When we feel lost and alone, God walks beside us. When we dream of a better life for us and for our children, God is dreaming with us, ready to work with us. When the forces of hate literally try to kill God by nailing Jesus to a cross, God defies these earthy powers and responds with new life.

And what is so remarkable to me is that it is to these two travelers, these two disciples who are so wrapped up in grief that they cannot even recognize their teacher, that the resurrected Christ makes his first appearance in Luke's gospel. It's not to the women at the tomb, it's not to the eleven well-known disciples, but instead it's to the ordinary, grief stricken nobodies that Jesus walks, talks, and reveals himself in the breaking of the very first Eucharist bread. The bread that not only fed these weary travelers but showed them the face of God.

As someone who has gone through four years of theological education and has a deep love for the sacraments, I have done a lot of study about the Eucharist. I've read books, listened to lectures, and explored in conversation

the history, purpose, and significance of this meal we share each week. And there are times in seminary when I have received the body and blood of Christ five or six times in a single week! And honestly, I have sometimes feared that this mysterious and beautiful sacrament has largely lost its meaning for one who has literally written term papers about its nature and received it so regularly that it has become almost rote. And I confess that I do not always recognize Christ present in the breaking of the bread.

But during my internship year serving a parish in Minnesota, my view of the Eucharist changed. Each week, I looked into the faces of those joining Christ's table as I gave them a piece of bread. Well-worn faces showing reverence and awe. Teenage faces wishing they were still asleep in bed. But it was the faces of the children that really stick out to me. I saw the eagerness of these children as they came to the table to receive the Eucharist. The glimmer in their eyes as they put their hands out in joyous anticipation and the smiles that would beam when I said "The body of Christ, given for you." And I saw that they were recognizing something I don't always see – that this wasn't just a piece of bread.

I am convinced that these little Christians knew far better than me, theological education and all, that they were receiving something special. Though they may not be able to name the mysteries I have studied, they knew that Christ was once again revealing himself to them in the breaking of this

bread. The same bread that Christ blessed that evening in Emmaus, showing himself to his disciples. The same bread that we all share each time we gather around Christ's table, eager for another revelation, to hear that this body of Christ is given for you – for you – for you – and for me. A recognition that Christ is with us on our journey.

When Christ revealed himself to those weary travelers at the first Eucharist in Emmaus, we are told that they got up and went back to Jerusalem to proclaim the good news. And the Greek word Luke uses to say they “got up” is the same word he uses to proclaim that Christ was resurrected. Through Christ's revelation in the breaking of the bread, these two disciples were resurrected – resurrected from their grief, resurrected from their doubts and fears, and resurrected to proclaim the gospel and work toward the Kingdom of God.

Through this same holy meal, we too are joined and rejoined in Christ's resurrection. And in that resurrection, we are freed to rejoice in a God who walks with us and never abandons us.

We are freed to join in the new hope we can share through Christ's resurrection and triumph over our doubts and fears.

We are freed from the bonds of sin and death and the evils that surround us.

We are freed to walk the road confident that we are never alone.

And, my friends, I think that is how the resurrection responds to what the world throws at us – it frees us.

Freed from our doubts and fears, we are free to work along with Christ toward the realization of the Kingdom of God:

We are freed to work with Christ as we advocate for liberation and peace.

We are freed to lift up those who have been crushed by oppression's burden as we challenge the powerful.

We are freed to protect and care for Creation.

We are freed to raise nearly \$700 to support the ministry of the Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants here in Chicago.

We are freed to demand the reign of justice and love in our society.

The resurrection shows us that God overcomes the burdens of grief and doubt that we carry on our sojourn – and free from those burdens, we can join with God in changing the world.

It demonstrates God's faithfulness to us and triumph over the all evils we may encounter.

And it reminds us that wherever we go, Christ goes with us – even when we don't recognize him.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!