

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 23, 2023
3rd Sunday of Easter
Luke 24: 13-35

Loving God, come and speak to our hearts today. May we, like those on the Emmaus Road, find your words burning with hope in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

“But We Had Hoped . . .”

Easter may seem like a lifetime ago but here in the church we're still celebrating. And in the story from Luke you just heard, it's still Easter Sunday. Cleopas and his unnamed companion are on their way to Emmaus; it's late afternoon. But earlier in the day they'd overheard the women telling the disciples that Jesus was alive. So, Cleopas and his companion ran to the tomb with the hope that they would see Jesus there. But they didn't, and now that the day is winding down, they're beginning to doubt the women's report and begin to believe that Jesus really is dead. “We had hoped that he would be the one to save Israel,” Cleopas said.

I love The Emmaus story because there's something in there for all of us. For anyone who's ever uttered the words: “We had hoped” there is something in there for you. For anyone who has ever said:

We had hoped the family would be together for the holiday...
We had hoped that the first signs of forgetfulness were nothing to worry about.
We had hoped the shadow on the CAT scan was just a false alarm.
We had hoped the company would turn around ...
We had hoped we could work things out.

For anyone who's ever uttered the words: “We had hoped”, this story is for you because you have walked the Emmaus road.

When we meet up with Jesus in today's story, he's trying to help Cleopas and his companion. They're pretty down, because for all they know their dear friend Jesus is dead and therefore all their hopes and dreams for a new world and new life are dead, too. Being a close follower of Jesus, Cleopas' grief over the death of his friend was fresh and raw as he walked that road. His life could have been in danger, too, if the authorities knew of his close allegiance to Jesus. And now that he's gone, what is he supposed to do? Jesus' instructions were somewhat fuzzy and included things like "feed my sheep" and "sow seeds" and stuff like that. Given the intensity of emotions that surrounded him, maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise to us that Cleopas didn't recognize Jesus. Maybe he couldn't see through all the tears he had shed, I don't know.

But then again maybe the Emmaus story isn't that kind of story. Maybe the Emmaus story isn't an eyewitness story. Perhaps it's more of a parable about how the risen Christ comes to us again and again and again when we need him the most.

The late Marcus Borg once asked about this story: "How much of the content of this story could we have captured on video? Would we have been able to record the risen Christ joining them, walking with them, conversing with them, and finally vanishing from the room as they received bread from him? For me, one has only to ask these questions in order to begin to wonder, "Maybe it's not that kind of story."

Ironically, the meaning of the story came to Borg when he and his wife tried to visit Emmaus with little success.

It was evening when their bus pulled into the town of Emmaus, about 6 miles outside Jerusalem. With excitement Marcus and his wife left the town square and approached the door of the church that was dedicated to the moment those disciples had when they recognized Jesus for the first time. Some boys were playing soccer in the courtyard nearby.

The tourists tried the church door, but the priests had already locked up for the night. So, they walked around to observe the simple church and see if they might find any dedication plaques or other things to tell them more

about the history of the building. As they passed the boys, one of them told them that the church was closed for the day. The Borgs noted how disappointed they were that they couldn't get inside.

A boy told them not to worry, that if they wanted to see the Emmaus church, there was another town of Emmaus just up the road another 5 miles, and another church there, almost as nice as this one.

On the bus ride back to Jerusalem, Marcus expressed his disappointment to the tour guide. "Oh, yes," said the guide, "there are five or six Emmauses nearby Jerusalem, all of them claiming to be the historic Emmaus. And who is going to tell these people that they are wrong when they truly believe that their town is the town where Jesus stopped? People will ask to go to Emmaus, and depending on when they ask, I take them to whichever one is closest."

Borg says when the tour guide told him there were actually five or six Emmauses, he began to realize something significant about the truth of the Emmaus story. And that is that Emmaus can be anywhere.

Friends, Emmaus is the place where we find companions on our journey, meet the risen Christ, and find hope once again. It's the place where we find an unexpected resurrection, which is to say the new life we need but no longer expected to ever come true. Emmaus can be the person who enters our life and brings new love or friendship; the new vocation that brings us fulfillment; or the new circumstances that breathe a breath of fresh air into our weary bones.

Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as "the place we go in order to escape." Emmaus is found in the ordinary places and experiences of our lives, and in the places to which we retreat to find solace when life is too much for us.

You see, when Jesus reminded Cleopas and his friend of the wonderful stories from their holy scripture, he told them stories of hope. And when he did that he showed them that there was still hope for a new life, and that their dreams didn't die but were alive and well and walking along

beside them. That no matter what the world and life threw at them, or throw at us, there's always cause for hope.

Now I realize when we look at the world around us it might not always seem that way. After all, the news is filled with horrific stories and it's only natural to wonder where God is in the midst of all them. But I believe, I have to believe, that God is right there in the middle of them all, tending to the wounds of the broken-hearted wounds; giving us bread for our journey; and opening our eyes to the helpers in our midst.

I wonder on this Earth day Sunday if we might think of God as a gardener; imagine that – a gardener -- on his knees with hands in the dirt, holding the soil of our lives in her hands. This gardening God never slumbers or sleeps, because there is simply too much tending to do. This God is the provider of grain who then also in the body of Christ becomes our bread. Take and eat, this gardener God says, because she's ever vigilant and responsive to our pain.

Listen for a moment to the Czech writer and gardener Karel Čapek, who writes in his lovely book "The Gardener's Year":

I will now tell you how to recognize a real gardener. "You must come to see me," he says; "I will show you my garden." Then, when you go just to please him, you will find him with his rump sticking up somewhere among the perennials. "I will come in a moment," he shouts to you over his shoulder. "Just wait till I have planted this rose."

"Please don't worry," you say kindly to him.

After a while he must have planted it; for he gets up, makes your hand dirty, and beaming with hospitality he says: "Come and have a look; it's a small garden, but -- Wait a moment," and he bends over a bed to weed some tiny grass. "Come along. I will show you *Dianthus musalae*; it will open your eyes. Great Scott, I forgot to loosen it here!" he says, and begins to poke in the soil. A quarter of an hour later he straightens up again. "Ah," he says, "I wanted to show you that bell flower, *Campanula Wilsonae*. That

is the best campanula which -- Wait a moment, I must tie up this delphinium ...”

Is that not how a gardener proudly displays and tends to his garden? So imagine how much more God the gardener tends to us. Digging and weeding; planting and watering. Tending to our every need, especially when the days are hot, and we're parched, and in need of a good soaking of water, sunshine and fresh air.

Friends, just like that sunshine and fresh air, we may not always see God, but God is there, right there, on our own road to Emmaus. Always. I believe this.

I want to close with a short story; I don't believe I've shared this story with you. But it was for me an Emmaus moment.

It was a Thursday about 17 years ago; a beautiful spring day, and my husband Terry and I were driving home from the vet, having just said goodbye to my beloved dog Roxanne for the last time. We decided to stop at Sugar Creek Gardens, a nursery not far from our home. I don't know why we stopped, because we weren't much in the mood to shop for plants. But we stopped. There, I found a lovely small statue of a dog that resembled Roxanne, which was quite extraordinary since Roxanne was a mutt of 57 varieties. Deciding it would make a nice marker for her in the yard, we picked it up and I think it was then that a very nice clerk, who could clearly see we were upset, came over to help us. And as I stood up with the statue in my arms, I saw her nametag: Roxanne.

Whenever I read the story of Emmaus, I think about that day. Because that's when the meaning of the story came to me: that the Emmaus story isn't an eyewitness story, and the question to ask isn't "How come they didn't recognize Jesus?" Instead, the story is a parable about how God meets us where we are and walks beside us on our hopeful days and especially on our hopeless days.

The story shows us that Christ journeys with us, whether we know that or not, realize that or not, or recognize that or not. And not only that, but

even when we flee from the garden or shirk our responsibilities, God remains faithful and vigilant, hands in the dirt, delighting in the world, and inviting us to join in the gardening work that sustains and heals.

Amen.

Risen Christ, yours is the heartbeat of grace deep within us,
the light step beside us on our journeys,
the footprints in the garden, revealing how you carry us when we grow weary.

Yours is the face we glimpse when we perceive one another's holiness.

Yours are the promises: that life conquers death,

that goodness is stronger than evil,

and that we can build our lives around your shining truth.

Awaken us today, to all that becomes possible, because you live.... Amen.