

We Had Hoped

Luke 24:13-35

One of the interesting characteristics of the resurrection accounts from all four Gospel writers is how clear they make it that no one expected Jesus to be raised from the dead.

As Jesus and his followers traveled toward Jerusalem, he told them – more than once – that he would suffer and be killed, rising again on the third day. Now the suffering and death have happened. The third day has come, and the disciples all seem to have forgotten that Jesus taught them he would be raised from death.

There are differences in the details of the Easter narratives, but similarities in the broad strokes.

Mary Magdalene, perhaps with some other women, goes to the tomb on Sunday morning. But not because she expects to greet her risen Lord. She carries the spices used to anoint the bodies of the dead. Mary and her companions expect to perform a final, loving, burial service for the corpse of their executed teacher and friend. They find the stone rolled away. The tomb does not contain Jesus' body. At some point in each account, angels appear to announce that Jesus has been raised.

As Mark tells the story, the women are not delighted at the news that Jesus has defeated death as he promised, but instead so terrified by the experience of moved stone, empty tomb, dazzling angel that they flee the tomb and say nothing to anyone.

In Matthew's account, the women seem inclined to trust the angels' message, leaving "the tomb quickly and with great joy" and running "to tell the disciples" (28:8). Jesus appears to them, and, in seeing and touching him, they believe he has been raised.

John writes that when Mary tells the others of the empty tomb, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved hurry to the garden to see it for themselves. But then – the two men just go home because, according to John, they "did not yet understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." Mary stays, but only to keep trying to get someone to tell her where Jesus' body has been put.

And in Luke, the Gospel we have read today, when Mary and the other women report the empty tomb and angelic announcement to the other disciples, it is dismissed as "an idle tale".

The thread running through all these accounts is that Jesus' followers believe he is dead. That's reasonable, of course. He died quite publicly, in full view of the world, hung on a cross on a hill. The body taken down from that cross was clearly, irrefutably dead – broken by its ordeal. Jesus himself had said from the cross, "It is finished" and "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." There is simply no question about his death. Now it is three days later. Strange things have happened. When Mary and the others arrive, the broken body is no longer in the tomb. Dazzling angels with astonishing news are there instead. The women to whom Jesus has

appeared have moved from grief to joy, but the rest of the disciples are still caught confusion, not yet understanding the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead.

And that's where we have picked up the story with our verses from Luke. This familiar story begins with two dejected disciples trudging from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Sunday afternoon. A stranger joins them and as they walk together, the conversation turns to "the things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." Cleopas and his companion describe their grief and their confusion, saying "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

We had hoped.

What a world of sadness is in those words! There is a lyric in an Easter hymn we sang together last week: *Christ has risen where hope died*. For these disciples on the road to Emmaus, hope has died.

We know, because Luke has already told us, that not only has Jesus been raised from the dead, as he promised, but he is right there, walking next to these two grieving disciples. They do not recognize him; the text says that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him", and I think we often interpret that as divinely-caused blindness; for some reason, God prevents them from seeing Jesus clearly. But perhaps they do not recognize Jesus because, within the finitude of their human experience, it does not, cannot, occur to them that this living body is the body of the friend they know to be dead.

In a reflection on this Scripture, Alister McGrath suggests that "What we see is shaped by what we expect to find. We tend to filter our experience of the world, fitting our findings into our existing way of thinking."¹ He affirms the thesis with which I began, that "Nobody seems to have been expecting Jesus to be raised from the dead. The idea simply wasn't available to them as part of the prevailing Jewish pattern of beliefs and expectations concerning the afterlife."² When Jesus had told his disciples that on the third day after his execution, he would be raised from the dead, they had no category of knowledge in which to put that information; no thought process by which to make Jesus' words real and accessible.

Our hope can only extend as far as our imagination does. We cannot hope for something we cannot imagine. And so, Cleopas and the other disciple have put hope in the past tense – *we had hoped*. Though Jesus had assured his followers that he would be raised again on the third day, these disciples remain convinced that their beloved rabbi is lost to them and to Israel.

Their grief persists even as the stranger speaks to them of the Messiah, interpreting what Moses and the prophets reveal about the Messiah. Their grief persists until he accepts their

¹ Alister McGrath; *Resurrection*; p. 14

² Ibid

offer of hospitality and sits at table with them, where in the breaking of the bread, they know him as their risen Lord and their hope is reborn.

Alister McGrath describes the scene this way: “It is not what Jesus has said, but what he does, that changes their perceptions. *When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. (24:30-31).* We see here once more the central paradox of the gospel resurrection accounts. The disciples really meet Jesus, as he always was, a person of flesh and blood. Yet at first they do not recognize him. And when they do, they recognize that he is something more than mere flesh and blood.

And with that recognition comes a complete reconsideration of the ‘big picture’ – the story of God’s dealings with God’s people. A new way of understanding the nature of that story, and especially Jesus’ place within it, emerges. ... A personal encounter with the risen Christ utterly altered the landmarks of the two disciples’ world.”³

One of the messages of the resurrection is that God is not bound by human expectation. Mary Magdalene and the other women who go to the tomb on Sunday morning, Peter and the other disciple who run to the garden at Mary’s news, Cleopas and his companion who head sadly toward home, and all the others who followed and loved Jesus, along with the religious and political authorities who executed him, may not have expected Jesus to be raised from the dead. But God is the God of life. Death will not defeat God’s purpose for humanity and creation. In the raising of Jesus Christ, God acts to bring life out of death. God chooses to burst through narrow human expectations so that human understanding can step into a broad place of abundant and eternal life.

Another resurrection message is that God calls us always into bigger hope. The disciples on the road to Emmaus had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. Indeed, Jesus is the one who redeems not only Israel but all nations, all people, all creation. Jesus is the one in whom our hope can be securely placed, for, just as he promised, he has been raised from death to walk alongside us today and always.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Amen.