

*When's Easter?* (28Apr19) Luke 24:13-35

This Bible story set on Easter evening fits for us a week out from Easter. We may ask ourselves what difference it has made in this week. Has the resurrection changed anything and helped us in these days? Has it redeemed anything? Saved us? What of that good news has gone with us, or what has gone away? Did you wish it would mean more, would do something better for you?

Those two people in the reading heard the same report we did: Jesus is not in the tomb. The proclamation is he's been raised. They also had that message in their ears: Alleluia. Christ is risen.

But it didn't help. They remained confused. They were still overcome with sadness. They kept trying to figure it out, to analyze it—to theologize or psychologize or mythologize or even eulogize the meaning as they went back on the slow, sometimes painful journey into regular old life, the life without Jesus.

They could repeat what had happened in those days. They even knew it would happen: Jesus had said he would die and on the third day rise again. They've got the creed right. But it didn't seem to help those two disciples: After everything else, we thought this was it, this was the time, this was the solution, this was the way out.

It's marked by maybe the saddest phrase we can speak or feel: we were hoping. We had hoped. It holds the bitterest of endings, the completely collapsing disappointment, utterly lonely lost-ness of all that could have been, was supposed to be.

It's a phrase that glowers in our lives, when there is simply no more chance, no way, that the feeling of good is in the past: I had hoped to be able to have children. We had hoped the test results were not that, that the treatment would work. I had hoped to get into that school, to make the team, to make friends. I had hoped that this job was a good fit. We hoped our efforts could've been effective. I had hoped to avoid the accident. We hoped the election returns would come in with a few more votes to count. We'd hoped we were done with snow! I had hoped to live long enough... We were hoping this relationship would

work out. I'd hoped I made the right decision. I hoped I'd get help. We were hoping, we had hoped. We used to have hope, but the hope is gone, has left us with only despair, an unhappy ending.

So sad and shut up, such past tense hope. There aren't back-up possibilities then, and plan B's and ready alternatives and second-best choices. With Everything pinned on it, when hope is gone, there's nothing left. All is lost except hollow tears, aimless steps, disenchanted thoughts. I'm sorry even to mention it, to call them to mind. I grieve with you in each overwhelming, all-encompassing instance.

So Easter certainly ought to speak to that. Jesus needs to make a difference.

That is what we proclaimed last week: death itself is undone, so all the other dead endings have pathways out. It's the start of a whole new creation, beyond all the old, a new 8<sup>th</sup> day that makes a difference, a new thing, a new hope. We celebrated not just for a pleasant little diversion, not just observing tradition. It wasn't to spice up death, to dress it up, to put roses on a grave, make believe that things could be cheery and pretty, while ignoring the reality we really knew.

No, we said this changed everything. God's blessing totally unleashed to set us free from all that had trapped us, all that held us back, all that left us in despair. We said that. Maybe even momentarily believed it, right?

But then we went out, back into the other existence, the normal rhythms, the close encounters with stuff that saps hope. From the blahs to frantic, from mild uncertainty to drowning despair, if you had a week at all like me, you could feel hopes slipping out of your fingers, unable to be gripped and held close to your heart. It wasn't that I forgot. It was just that Easter didn't eventually seem to matter much. I felt like I was facing it all without inspiration from the Holy Spirit, without God's love, without the unstoppable Jesus.

In such moments, I go on the hunt. I don't want to give up. I want to present-tense-hope it can and will be better. Because I'm desperate, I

want Jesus. Feeling hopeless, I all but beg for hope.

Those two disciples were trudging along, trying to figure it out. It may be hoping against hope, but they're still talking it through, looking for answers. It's over, seeming there's nothing possible, but they keep looking.

I want to share a bit of a companion who walked along on my hunt this week, from the autobiography of Catholic monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton. I was reading it as one of my Lenten disciplines, but I'm not very disciplined and not all that diligent at devotion; even those good things can be too much and fall by the wayside. So I am only a third of the way through the book even though we're beyond Lent. This week in a few pages before bed I read this passage on looking for God and goodness and direction and meaning but not being able to see it. I'm going to share an extended chunk. It's also beautiful, as we're celebrating Earth Day Sunday. Writing about when Hitler came to power, and when he himself wasn't a believer, Merton said:

People seem to think that [horrors of war are] in some way a proof that no merciful God exists... On the contrary... There is not a flower that opens, not a seed that falls into the ground, and not an ear of wheat that nods on the end of its stalk in the wind that does not preach and proclaim the greatness and the mercy of God to the whole world.

There is not an act of kindness or generosity, not an act of sacrifice done, or a word of peace and gentleness spoken, not a child's prayer uttered, that does not sing hymns to God...

All of these things, all creatures, every graceful movement, every ordered act of the human will, all are sent to us as prophets from God. But because of our stubbornness they come to us only to blind us further...

We refuse to hear the million different voices through which God speaks to us, and every refusal hardens us more and more against [God's] grace—and yet God continues to speak to us...

God, how often in the last centuries have you not come down to us, speaking to us in our mountains and groves and hills, and telling us what was to come upon us, and we have not heard you. How long shall we continue to be deaf to your voice?

When I [traveled], your love went with me, although I could not know it, and could not make myself aware of it...

I was not sure where I was going, and I could not see...But you saw further and clearer than I...and you were even then preparing for me...my shelter and my home. And when I thought there was no God and no love and no mercy, you were leading me all the while. (*Seven Storey Mountain*, p128-130)

In front of our eyes, through our lives is God's tireless relentless effort for the good, the constant loving pursuit of life on your behalf. Yet we don't know, don't understand. For all of our searching and trying to figure it out, for all the truth that is right around us, we remain lost and despairing.

The two followers of Jesus walked the road with Jesus, with him right next to them, with the solution to their sadness, the very constant presence of hope, but didn't (or couldn't?) even know it.

We wander into here today, still looking, for what God would have to say, for reassurance, for some sort of possibility when in way too many ways it seems there isn't anything left. We look and listen and ponder and still don't see.

But Jesus walks in with you. He walks along as the Scriptures are opened and reveals himself in them. And he sets this table, an unknown stranger in our midst, and vanishes and isn't visible as himself even as soon as you'd come to know that he was here. But in the breaking of the bread, as he himself takes it, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to you, he is here for you.

That is why we do these things week after week. This isn't just a week later, gone by. As every Sunday, this is a celebration of resurrection, of the new creation, of Easter all over again. We gather with opening the Scriptures so Jesus can be illuminated in them. We gather at this table, because it is here he might be made known.

I can't guarantee that you'll see. I can't make it happen. You can't make it happen for yourself. But still more than in sprouting flowers or acts of sacrificial kindness or the path ahead that leads homeward, in this small and simple practice of ongoing Easter, this preaching and communion, this Word and Sacrament come to be reliable places where when all is lost, you may be found again, where when you're wondering where Jesus

is he may be revealed, where your hope may be restored, and life itself.

I can't pull back the curtain. I can't offer explanations. That would go back to theologizing and the fruitless trying to figure it out on our own. I can't say how it functions to restore you, can't detail what it means for Jesus to encounter your despair, how he deals with that to overcome your sadness.

But I trust he's here. And I pray that once again you can go out with joy, with confidence, with hope, at least for another week.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.