

This is now the third Sunday in this Easter season, and so far, we've had three what might be thought rather downbeat stories on Sundays. First, there was the story of Mary weeping by the open tomb. Last week we heard of Thomas doubting that the resurrection had happened. And today we have two disciples walking away from Jerusalem on that first Easter morning, unable to comprehend what's happened. They were walking a road that's uncomfortably familiar. We've all walked this road at some point in our lives. We've walked it, we've lost our way on it, we've left it behind and come back to it. The road is the road to Emmaus and we recognize it by the words we hear ourselves saying when our feet hit its rough and winding way, when we find ourselves saying, "but we had hoped": we had hoped that the tumor wasn't malignant, we had hoped our marriage would get easier, we had hoped our son would come home, we had hoped the depression would lift, we had hoped to keep our jobs, we had hoped to carry the baby to term, we had hoped for a peaceful death, we had hoped to experience God's presence when we pray, we had hoped our faith would survive. The words we speak on the road to Emmaus are words of disappointment, bewilderment, pain, and yearning. They're the words we use when we come to the end of our hopes, when our expectations have been dashed, our cherished dreams are dead and there's nothing left to do but leave defeated and done. But we had hoped.

In our gospel story this week, Cleopas and his unnamed friend say these words to the stranger who draws alongside them on the road. "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel", they said. Amazingly, on that first Easter evening, they're walking *away* from Jerusalem to Emmaus, under the impression that Jesus is dead. The Lord they staked their lives on, the Messiah they thought would change the world, had died a humiliating death and his kingdom had come to nothing. I say amazingly, because they'd *actually spoken* to the women who'd been at the empty tomb earlier that morning. They'd heard all that, and yet they were *still* walking away heartbroken and disappointed. But we had hoped for so much more, they were thinking.

And it's amazing that the three resurrection stories we've heard since Easter all speak of how hard it is or was for those first witnesses to recognize the risen Lord Jesus. If it was hard for them, the witnesses, to recognize him, how much more for those of us who come later. Even in this Easter season, as our hallelujahs ring again, as we celebrate the wonder of Jesus' resurrection, the road to Emmaus stretches out before us, offering defeat, disappointment, and disillusionment. And this is the road that Jesus chose to walk that first Easter evening. It's a road that honors our deep disappointment, even as it holds out the possibilities of nourishment and refreshment. And I think as we hear this story again of the stranger on the road to Emmaus, we can learn three things about Jesus' heart and character.

The first thing I notice about this story is its undramatic nature. This is the story of a quiet resurrection. You might think that the God who suffers a torturous and holy unjust death would come back with vengeance, determined to shout of his triumph from the rooftops, to prove his accusers and killers wrong. But no. Jesus does no such thing. He never goes back to Pilate or the Sanhedrin and says, "I told you so." He makes absolutely no effort to vindicate himself or avenge his cruel death. Instead, on the evening of his greatest victory, the risen Christ takes a walk. He takes a leisurely walk on a quiet, out of the way road. And when he sees two people walking ahead of him, he approaches them in a guise so gentle, so understated, so mundane that they don't recognize him. This is not what we might always want from the resurrected Christ, but we had hoped he'd be more dramatic, easier to spot, more convincing, more unmistakably divine. We had hoped he'd make the post-Easter faith easier. Part of the disappointment we face on our Emmaus road is the disappointment of a quiet resurrection, the disappointment of God's maddening subtlety and hiddenness, the disappointment of a Jesus who prefers a quiet, hidden encounter to the theatrics we expect and crave.

The second thing I notice about Jesus in the story is that he tells a bigger story. As soon as Jesus falls

into step with the companions on the road, he invites them to tell their story. "What are you discussing with each other", he says, "as you walk along?" And astonished by the question, Cleopas and his mate tell Jesus everything. They share with him the story of what's happened, the story of Jesus' rise and fall. They tell of how they had high expectations for their now crucified leader, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. They describe their devastation at his death, their confusion, their loss, their uncertainty. They tell Jesus the whole story or what they think is the whole story. And Jesus listens. He hears them out. And when they're done, he tells the story back to them. And as he does so, the story changes in his retelling. It becomes, as it really always was, something bigger, deeper, broader, wiser, much richer than they understood. Here's what you're leaving out, Jesus seems to say. Here's what you're missing. And he tells the story beginning with Moses and the prophets and going on to interpret all that the scriptures say about him. And in so doing, he helps the travelers to see their place in the story that precedes them, a narrative big enough to hold their disappointment without being defeated by it.

When Jesus tells the story of the death of the Messiah and its place in the sweeping cosmic arc of redemption, hope and divine love that span the centuries, when Jesus tells the story, the listeners' hearts burn within them. Jesus gave Cleopas and his friend the ability to place the story of their own lives in the more expansive context of God's all-encompassing story.

And the final thing I notice about Jesus in the story is that he doesn't impose himself on the others. When the travelers reach Emmaus, Jesus gives them the option of going on without him. In fact, he makes it out as if he's leaving, placing them in the position to have to invite him to stay. Do they want him to stay? Do they want to risk having this stranger in their home? Do they want to go deeper with the man who made their hearts burn? Or are they content to leave it where it stands and return to their ordinary lives without learning more?

What would have happened if Cleopas and his friends had said goodbye to Jesus at that point? How would their story have ended if Jesus had walked away? The companions would have missed so much that the Messiah they thought they knew and loved would have remained a stranger. They would not have experienced the intimate knowledge of broken bread and a shared cup. The joy of resurrection would not be theirs.

What would we have done? Jesus won't impose himself on us either. Do we desire to go deeper? Are we ready to get off the road of our failures and defeats? Do we really want to know who the stranger is? "Stay with us." That's what Cleopas and his friend end up saying to Jesus and he did. And we can make Cleopas' words a prayer for ourselves. "Stay with me, Jesus."

The chances are that many of us will find ourselves walking on an Emmaus road before too long. We'll hear ourselves saying, "I had hoped." That's when we need to pay particular attention to the resurrected Jesus who still walks quietly alongside his disciples. Amen.