

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 4, 2014
Third Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:14, 36-47
Psalm 116:10-17
I Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

The story in our Gospel lesson today is unique to Luke, and reveals a fascinating encounter between Jesus and two of his disciples several hours after Jesus' resurrection.

It happens on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. This story has become one of my favorite stories in all the New Testament.

Notice the four part movement to the narrative: 1) the two travelers are met on the road; 2) the Scriptures are opened to them; 3) they share in a meal that reveals to them the identity and presence of Christ; 4) they are then sent to share and live the good news.

This seems remarkably similar to what happens in authentic biblical worship. Authentic worship consists of *Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending forth*. It's what happens here at Epworth: Gathering, Word, Table, Dismissal. I believe one reason Luke tells this story is to demonstrate that in Christian worship, persons will be encountered by the living Christ.

But there is a more important reason why I love this story so much. It has to do with my own life experience, especially the older I get and the more “experience” with life that comes my way.

I love this story because of four little words that are sandwiched in the middle: ***But we had hoped...***

So much is said in these four little words. They speak of a future that is not to be. They speak of a dream that energized a person and created enthusiasm but did not materialize. They speak of a promise that created faith, but proved to be false. They speak of a future that is now closed off, irrelevant, dead. And few things are more tragic than a dead and hopeless future.

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a short story in six words. He is said to have replied by penning these words: “For sale: baby shoes, never used.”

Sometimes in life, it’s not just the tragedy of what *happens* that hurts. Sometimes, the pain comes from the gaping wound created by all that *could have happened*, but won’t.

This is what is occurring in Luke’s story of these two travelers on the Emmaus Road. **“But we had hoped...”**

I have come to love these words, not because I enjoy wallowing in dark or sentimental emotions, but because the longer I live the *more they ring true to me*.

They are not the only truth, of course. There is much in life that is beautiful, inspiring, and that deserves our gratitude. But there is also heartbreak, disappointment, and failure.

And here's what I've noticed through the years. Because we church people are people of the resurrection, we are often tempted to move past the pain and brokenness in our lives, to move quickly toward some sort of resolution, to avoid the cross-shaped experiences of our lives.

A friend shares the news of the death of his spouse, and we sympathize for a moment and then quickly change the subject. A colleague shares her disappointment about not getting a promotion, and we quickly retort with: "at least you have a job." We see an acquaintance that has experienced a terrible tragedy, and we avoid that person altogether because we just don't know what to say. We don't mean to be callous, we just feel inadequate to the task of confronting the brokenness of our lives.

So when we read a story like this one, it's very easy to quickly skip forward to the "burning hearts" portion of the story.

But before we do that, permit me this observation: *Before there are burning hearts, there must be broken ones.*

But we had hoped.....

In this wonderful story, Luke tells us that the risen Jesus comes to these heartbroken disciples, and walks alongside them on the road. Astonished that they don't see as they ought, he opens and explains the Scriptures to them to help them understand. Then he shares his presence with them through bread and wine. And then he gets them back up on their feet and sends them back into the world with hearts that are on fire.

This story set me to thinking about our congregation here at Epworth. I wondered: Is that what Jesus seeks to do with us each week as we worship together? Is Jesus coming along side us, astonished that we don't see as we ought, teaching us the Scriptures and revealing himself through bread and wine so that we might head out the doors and into the streets with hearts that are alive and on fire?

Then another question came to me: Could we be a congregation that could do for others what Jesus did for these disciples? Could we be a clinic of sorts, equipped to treat peoples' broken hearts?

Could we be a people whose hearts are sensitive, and whose ears are ready to listen when people say to us: ***But we had hoped.....?***

Could we be a place where persons are allowed to share their disappointment that the cancer has returned, the beloved has died, the addiction is persisting, the children have walked away, the job did not materialize, the family has rejected them, and the church has hurt them instead of helped?

I love this story of the Emmaus Road. It rings true for me. In the experience of these two disciples I see myself, and I realize that quite often in my life my heart has first been *broken* before it could *burn*.

These two disciples needed permission to grieve a future that would never be, **in order that they might hear and receive the future God had created and prepared for them.** And it happened *when they were ready, and as they were able.*

Folks today need the exact same thing. May Epworth be the kind of place where the risen Christ chooses to show up and walk alongside us, teaching us, feeding us with his presence. May we be the kind of place where broken hearts can begin to heal, and yes – even to *burn* again.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.