

3rd Sunday of Easter A 23 April 2023

Luke 24:13-35

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. Let's pray: ...

Saints, our lives swing like a pendulum between two extremes – disappointment and hope. Sometimes we're filled with one; sometimes the other, usually a combination in between. We travel back and forth between Jerusalem and Emmaus. There's little wonder that we sometimes get discombobulated.

The gospel rarely gives us straight answers and seldom tells us what to do. Rather, it invites us to reflect on our lives in light of Jesus and return to our truest selves. The road to Emmaus is a map which helps us to re-orient ourselves. It reveals intersections of Jesus' life and our lives. It begs to be recognised as a story about our lives. It's a story of disappointment and hope.

If you find yourself disappointed then this is your story. If your life has ever been filled with hope then this is your story. And if you've ever been in that in between place, between disappointment and hope, then this is your story.

The road to Emmaus describes our journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back to Jerusalem. I'm not talking about geographical locations; rather, Jerusalem and Emmaus as representative realities of our lives; as portals through which we gain greater awareness of the fullness of God, ourselves, and others.

Jerusalem

Have you ever felt like you just have to get away? Or like life's given you more than you can handle? Have you ever run away from life? Have you ever been deeply disappointed? Have you ever felt lost, as though your world's been turned upside down? Have you ever wrestled with those big questions: "Who am I now? What's next? Where do I go? What do I do?"

Maybe you remember a time when you did everything right and life still didn't work out the way you planned or wanted? Have you grieved the death of a loved one, a dream, an identity, a future? Has your life ever been shattered? If so, then you know what it's like to be Cleopas and his companion.

It's Easter morning and the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem. Who could blame them? Jerusalem is a place of pain, sorrow, and loss. It's a place of death, unmet expectations, and disappointment. It's a place where their lives were shattered. No one wants to stay in that place. As they walk, they talk about all the things that happened, and all the things that didn't happen.

They talk about Jesus' arrest, torture, crucifixion, and death. They talk about hope that didn't materialise; expectations left unmet. They're disappointed and sad. They talk about the hope they had in Jesus and their disappointment at his death. A part of them has been lost, a part that died with Jesus. They'd heard rumours that he was alive but it all sounds like an "idle tale" (Luke 24:11). There's nothing to keep them in Jerusalem. Their lives are shattered.

Emmaus

I don't know why they go to Emmaus, but I know there're times when I just want to get away, when any place is better than where I am. Any place would be better than Jerusalem.

Emmaus is our escape from life. Or so we think. What we don't know at the time, and what Cleopas and his companion didn't know, is that it's also the way back to life. That realisation happened for the two disciples, as it does for us, in the breaking of the bread.

Maybe they didn't go to Emmaus to escape from life; rather, because they hungered for life. Maybe it wasn't brokenness that took them to Emmaus, but a hunger for wholeness. Maybe it wasn't disappointment that took them to Emmaus, but a hunger for hope.

Hunger is more than physical; it's also spiritual and emotional. We're hungry by nature. We hunger for life, love, wholeness, community, meaning, purpose. Maybe hunger is the reason the disciples strongly urged Jesus, "Stay with us." Jesus didn't only stay, he fed them. The guest they invited to their table turned out to be their host.

“When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.” They recognised him as the one they had left for dead in Jerusalem. They recognised him as their companion on the road to Emmaus. They recognised him as the one in whom all their hopes would be fulfilled. But Jesus wasn’t just giving them bread, he was restoring their hope. When Jesus broke the bread something broke open inside them and hope poured out, filling their souls.

Despite how it feels, our brokenness; our disappointment, doesn’t have the last say. Hope breaks open new life, seeing, recognition, community, welcome, hospitality, and love. Isn’t that why we gather around the table every Sunday? Isn’t that our unspoken desire for the meals we share with each other?

Jesus fed the disciples not just with bread but with himself: with his body, his life, his love, his compassion, his strength, his forgiveness, his hope, with all that he is and all that he has. Their life was being restored in their being broken open. But as soon as they saw and recognised Jesus, “he vanished from their sight.”

Where did he go? Was he playing “hide-and-seek” with them? Was he undoing everything that just happened? No. Nothing like that. He was no longer with them because he was now within them. The burning they felt in their hearts was the presence of Jesus, and he’d been there all along. Sometimes that burning is felt as brokenness, sometimes as hunger, and other times as deep joy and gratitude. And yet, it’s always Jesus.

And “that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem

They returned to the place which had left them so downcast in the first place. Jerusalem isn’t only the place of death, it’s also the place of life. Not only sorrow, but also joy. Not only disappointment, but also restored hope.

Cleopas and his companion arrive with news of their Emmaus experience only to hear that Jesus was alive, seen, and present in Jerusalem. We leave Jerusalem in order to return to Jerusalem: to face our deaths, losses, and disappointments. In doing so, we discover that life awaits us. We return to reclaim ourselves, to recover the lost pieces of ourselves. The city hasn’t changed but we have.

Disappointment, broken bread, restored hope. Jerusalem, Emmaus, Jerusalem. That seems to be how the pendulum swings. It's never that simple though, is it? It's one thing to name the pattern, but another to live it. It takes time and effort. It's not easy and it's painful. It means trusting that somehow the shards of our lives will become the pieces for a new life, a new way of seeing and living.

Given how this sermon started, you won't be surprised to hear that I don't have easy answers for how to live a pendulum-swinging, gospel-focused, disappointment and hope-filled life. I'm not going to tell you what to do. I can't. Instead, I have more questions:

- Where do you see this pattern in your life? How have you experienced it?
- Are you leaving Jerusalem? In Emmaus? On the way? Returning to Jerusalem?
- In what ways has your life been disappointing? Is it in pieces today?
- What are you running from today? This moment?
- What is your deepest hunger? What are you running toward?
- What is your Jerusalem today? Is it a place of sorrow and loss or is it a place of life and restoration?
- Where is your Emmaus? What do you need from Emmaus today?
- What today in your life is being broken open? What needs to be broken open?
- What in your life, is being or needs to be restored and put back together?

There are no right or wrong answers to those questions. There is only your answer. Whatever your answers may be, they describe the intersection of Jesus' life and your life. Disappointment, breaking open, and restoring are all places of that intersection. They were for the two disciples in today's gospel and they are for us as well.

Jesus was in Jerusalem before Cleopas and his companion ever left. He was with them on the road to Emmaus. He was in the breaking of the bread. And he was already in Jerusalem when they returned. Do you know what those intersections are called? They're called the gifts of God for the people of God, all wrapped up in Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.