



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Road to Emmaus”

Luke 24:13-35

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We had hoped. This month we had hoped that the Blue Jackets would go past the first round. We had hoped. Twenty-five years ago we had hoped that our nation would address racial injustice in the aftermath of Rodney King’s beating and the riots in South Central Los Angeles. We had hoped. These are some of the saddest words we can say.

Two disciples had hoped. They had hoped for a different outcome. Now they walk a dusty road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday afternoon. Trial, death penalty, and execution have flattened them. They flee Jerusalem. The city reminds them they that had hoped in vain.

We’ve all got our Jerusalems: a setting, a context in which someone or something has died. The divorce of our brother and beloved sister-in-law – that’s Jerusalem. Our candidate’s defeat, or our favorite team losing – that’s Jerusalem. In our story Jerusalem is an image for whatever we long to escape.

Archeologists have located many sites mentioned in the Bible: Bethlehem and Nazareth. They’ve never found Emmaus. Maybe that’s as it should be, the only way it could be, because something is going on here that is about more than geography. In Luke’s gospel Emmaus functions as a metaphor for wherever we go or whatever we do to escape pain and search for answers.

Step by repetitive step, walking gives disciples something to do, somewhere to go. A stranger comes near and matches their pace. They can’t believe he doesn’t know what’s happened. They tell him how Jesus impressed people with his mighty acts and eloquence, how promising things looked. They tell him how it all went wrong, so very, very wrong. “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped. It’s one of the saddest things we can say.

Businesses say it, “We had hoped our product would attract investors.” Divorcing spouses say it, “We had hoped our love could weather the storm.” We had hoped. Those words carry our deepest regrets. Families say it, “We had hoped she could overcome her addiction.” We had hoped; those words speak of a dream that didn’t materialize; of a future we did not choose.

Author Ernest Hemingway once was challenged to write a short story in six words. He replied by writing on a napkin, “For Sale: Baby shoes, never used.” It’s not only the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but the gaping hole of all that could have happened but won’t.¹

We had hoped. Churches say it, “We had hoped we’d attract more visitors and receive more new members.” Years ago in work with our Presbytery, I was part of a group talking with a church that had shrunk to eleven members. They had three elders among them. Elders are church members elected and ordained to lead. They wanted to continue being a church and were seeking permission for the elders to serve continuously. Do any of

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/humor/daily-shouts/ernest-hemingways-six-word-sequels>

you think that's a good idea? It didn't sound good to me. The church was dying. But we approved it because we didn't want to dash their hopes, or the hopes we had for them. In retrospect, a more courageous response would have been to try to reframe these hopes.

On the road to Emmaus a stranger encounters two people grieving a future that can never be. He gently places their sad story in a new frame. He opens up the scriptures to them to see Jesus in another way, not as an undefeated champion but as a suffering servant who is the Messiah. Oh, to have heard that conversation!

Jesus comes alongside people full of regret; grieving, lonely, cynical people. Even those who know him, even those walking right beside him don't recognize him.

Take the man from North Carolina. Last August he called in to C-Span's *Washington Journal*. It's a morning interview program that educates viewers about national issues. Policymakers discuss the news of the day as well as topics raised by callers.

Heather McGhee had been interviewed on the program. She is the president of a progressive think tank and a young black woman. After the interview she began taking call in's. The man from North Carolina calls in. He leads by saying he is prejudiced against black people. The caller says his name is Garry and he's prejudiced because of things he sees in the news. But he doesn't want to be prejudiced. He says, "What can I do to change? You know, to be a better American?"

Heather listens carefully. She offers some thoughtful, tangible advice: get to know black people. Read up on black history. Stop watching the nightly news. Their conversation could have ended there. That could have been the end of their common path. But it wasn't, and still isn't. Thirty-six-year-old Heather McGhee and Garry Civitello, a 58-year-old disabled Navy veteran, continue to talk.

Garry has taken Heather's suggestions to heart. He's been reading *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander's book about mass incarceration.

His new path includes other changes. He avoids TV shows that focus on inner-city crime or play up minority stereotypes. He now notices the many Confederate flags that fly near his home town. He tells Heather he has begun taking iPhone pictures of them.

Garry has developed his own system for evaluating social interactions. Using a scale of one to ten, one being awful and ten being great, he grades his own prejudgment of how friendly a person of color will be toward him. Then he grades the reality. His main laboratory is the V.A. hospital in Asheville.

At first, I was giving people threes...then I have a little conversation, like "Wow, the traffic really got bad out this way," and [he'll] say "Yeah, it really did. How long you been living here?" All of a sudden I'm having a laugh with [him], and I'm giving [him] eights and nines!²

I don't want to make Garry's journey into something bigger than it is. One man in North Carolina isn't going to change our country's legacy of slavery or the racial injustice around us. But he's trying; he's decided to take steps on the road.

² <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/02/a-friendship-for-a-more-tolerant-america>

Heather McGhee is walking with him. She didn't write him off. She still hasn't. Her actions don't illustrate "We had hoped," as if defeat is final, but "We are hoping," as if newness is possible. Something about their conversation made Garry's heart burn within him and opened him to glimpse a life-altering truth. Now he is actually doing something about his brokenness, about our national brokenness.

Life in a post-resurrection world means cultivating awareness that what we see and what we experience isn't all there is. On the road the disciples learn that the story of Jesus hasn't ended; he's alive, elusive; present but also absent.

For the disciples, life after Easter will be just as hard as life before Easter; maybe even harder, because now life is more complicated. Things don't and can't go back to the way they were. Life in our post-Easter world means being open to strangers and surprises and heart burn!

Later in worship we will celebrate those graduating from high school. Seniors, this part of the sermon is for you. You are walking a road of life and faith. So far your families have walked beside you, guiding you. They've made you eat healthy food and wear braces. They've driven you to soccer practices and band concerts, Christmas pageants and confirmation. They've supervised the road you've taken; they've overseen your walk. After graduation, later this summer, things are going to change. All that has come before, all that you have learned and practiced is preparing you to live outside your family home, to take the next steps on your road of life and faith. Adventures await. Wonderful adventures await. Good times, and hard times, too. Today we remind you of the great promise of faith; that you don't walk alone. There will be times when you feel alone. But our faith reminds us that we never walk alone.

The disciples come near the village. "Stay with us" they tell the stranger. At the table the stranger becomes the host, who takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread to them. Their eyes are opened. They recognize him and he vanishes from their sight. Disciples remember how their hearts burned within them when he talked with them on the road.

We may not be looking for Jesus. But Jesus has a way of finding us. So don't be surprised when you meet a stranger on the road. Don't be surprised when your heart burns, because newness is possible. God is always working new life and healing and new hope. This is our life of faith after Easter. Don't be surprised.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Amen.