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We Had Hoped . . . We Have This Hope

april 28, 2020 by harryjheintz

[This message was given, in virtual form, for Gates Presbyterian Church, Rochester, on the third Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2020.]

“But we had hoped...” Those four little words say so much. But we had hoped that this novel coronavirus would be done by now. But we had hoped that we would be back in our sanctuaries on Easter Sunday. But we had hoped that everything would be better by April 26. My first grandson is graduating from college in one week in Boston—and there will be

no commencement ceremony, no trip to one of my favorite cities for a festive occasion. “*But we had hoped....*” My second grandson is in his final semester at Gates-Chili High School and has not been on campus in over a month. He rehearsed hours and hours for the spring musical, “*Les Miserables,*” and it has already been postponed once and soon it may be cancelled. We still hope there will be a commencement for his class in late June. “*But we had hoped....*” I have a new granddaughter born nine weeks ago in this country. But her parents are living in Cambodia for several years for their work. They had planned to return two days ago. My daughter works for the Peace Corps, and the State Department is not letting her, her husband, and their new child return there for the time being. They wait in hope. “*But we had hoped....*”

These two disciples, one named Cleopas and one unnamed, are dealing with hope lost. They are followers of Jesus and know full well what happened in Jerusalem on a dark Friday, for them just two days ago. They are on a long walk, when a third person comes alongside and walks with them. He discerns that they are discouraged and asks them, “What’s going on with you?” Cleopas answers that they have just had their hopes devastated. The stranger, of course, is not a stranger at all, but they don’t know that yet. Jesus, as he so often does, uses questions to draw them out. “What happened? What are you talking about?”

Then Cleopas says it: “*But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.*” Their world was in devastation and disarray, perhaps a bit like ours is now. For the women that went to the tomb early Sunday morning, for the men huddled in hiding, hope was lost. For these two disciples walking to a village named Emmaus seven miles away, hope is lost. They had tasted sweet hope; now there is a bitter aftertaste. Might as well go on a long walk; anything to get away from Jerusalem, city where hopes are dashed and prophets killed.

The risen Lord keeps showing up in such unexpected places. Remember when at the end of the Super Bowl, the most valuable player, still on the field, would be asked, “Now that you’ve won the Super Bowl, where are you going?” The answer: “I’m going to Disney World.” (Doesn’t that sound good right now?) Just hours ago Jesus walked out of a grave. “Hey, Jesus, now that you are risen from the dead where are you going?” “I’m going to Emmaus. Then I guess I will go back to Jerusalem. There I will enter a locked room and announce my presence to some fear-filled disciples. Then I might take a trip back to Galilee.” Note where he doesn’t go. He doesn’t go the Temple, the center of religious life in Israel. He doesn’t go to Pilate’s courtroom, where justice wasn’t done. He doesn’t go to Rome to show the emperor

that he is risen and he alone is Lord. He doesn't go to Athens to meet with the great philosophers. No. He goes to ordinary places. Like a village named Emmaus, which is mentioned in the entire Bible once. This shouldn't surprise us at all. From his birth in little Bethlehem, to his childhood in backwater Nazareth, he has always been honoring the ordinary. He loves to be with ordinary people in ordinary places, revealing extraordinary glimpses of God with us. Here it is a walk with two hope-dashed disciples.

I'm a physically active extroverted person, so doing shelter in place isn't easy for me. It is required for now and I am honoring it. But most days I get out of my house for a pre-breakfast jog, in which I don't get close to anyone. Later in the day, I often visit local parks, wearing gloves and a mask and avoiding close contact with anyone. As I jog or walk, I try to notice little glories of nature: early wildflowers. Geese. Ducks. A swan. Blossoms and blooms. Babbling brooks. I pray that I will be attentive to all that surrounds me—and that I will be seeing Jesus all around me. In nature. In other persons. And I pray for whatever and whomever comes to mind. I think I do my best praying when I am moving. I like that Easter day had Jesus moving. Walking. Visiting old friends.

It makes me happy that Jesus on his resurrection day goes for a long walk. It is interesting that these two disciples don't recognize him. But neither did Mary Magdalene when Jesus spoke directly to her next to an empty tomb. I don't know exactly what it means when scripture says, *"Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."* Theologically, I know that God must open the eyes of our understanding. Still, it mystifies me that they don't recognize Jesus, walking and talking with them. I think there are two kinds of seeing. One is merely at the physical level: eyesight. The other is at a deeper level. Heart-sight. Soul-sight. Perceptive sight. These two disciples clearly see a stranger walking with them. But at a deeper level, they do not perceive who that stranger is. After all, they had hoped—and what happened in Jerusalem dashed their hope.

Hope is powerful. I believe in hope. 1 Corinthians 13 ends with these words: *"Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three."* Hope is crucial for living. Without hope, life is empty and stale. In the movie "Shawshank Redemption," there is a memorable scene when one prisoner says to another, "Hope is a dangerous thing." Yes, hope is dangerous. It can leave us discouraged at times. Like those two disciples. But I wouldn't choose to live without hope. Whatever discouragement we may experience, it won't last. Paul writes in Romans 5:3-5: *"... but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has*

been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Hebrews 6:19 says, “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul....”

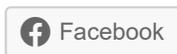
Hospitals in the metro New York area that have been dealing with COVID-19 patients have started playing hope-filled music, streaming through the corridors and rooms. Staff and patients hear songs like, “Here Comes the Sun,” “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” “Can’t Stop Believin’,” “Lean on Me,” “Eye of the Tiger,” “Beautiful Day,” and “Rise Up.” They draw hope to keep them going through trying times. That just gets me singing about my hope: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.” It keeps me singing, “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide, strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine with ten thousand beside. Great is they faithfulness.”

Hope is not the same as optimism. I like optimism. I always think my team is going to win. I always think I will get final Jeopardy right. But my teams don’t always win. And I don’t always get final Jeopardy right. Hope is so much more than sunny optimism. “*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul....*” Our hope is not wishful thinking. It is not all happy thoughts and positive words. It is hope anchored in Jesus and his resurrection. This hope takes us through suffering and discouragement.

They had hoped.... And their hope is realized. They arrive at Emmaus. Something both ordinary and extraordinary happens. Listen to Luke telling it: “*When he 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 recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’*” That sounds like Holy Communion to me. Jesus has instituted the supper just three full days before, on the Thursday we call Maundy. And here he is, having come through the most extreme suffering, the most excruciating death, and on the day of his rising he is breaking bread with friends and opening their eyes to hope realized.

“*But we had hoped....*” Their hope was rightly placed. Jesus was walking with them, even when they didn’t know it was he. Jesus is walking with us, even when they don’t think he is. He is always Emmanuel, God with us. The risen Lord is always walking with us. “*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul....*”

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