

Easter 3A. Luke 24:13-35. April 26, 2020.

In our gospel reading today, it is still Easter Sunday. But it reminds us that that first Easter was not exactly an instant blaze of glory. The life of resurrection blooms slowly, rather than bursting out of the tomb in uproarious triumph. Most of Jesus' closest friends are still holed up in a room somewhere in Jerusalem, stuck in Good Friday and worried that they might be the next ones to be ground under the heel of the Roman Empire. The women who first found the new life of Easter have come back from the empty tomb already, but their report, wait for it, has not been believed.

And so with the tomb empty, but the risen Jesus not yet met, Cleopas and his friend are out on the road to Emmaus, getting out of town before things get any weirder. They hope that they are leaving behind the place of danger. They are also leaving behind their friends and comrades. And more poignantly, they are leaving behind their deepest hopes: that the man they followed all the way to death was the one to redeem Israel. Out on the road, they carry with them grief, disappointment, and fear. They are headed towards Emmaus, a town that no longer exists and even though several places in the holy land claim to be "the road to Emmaus," archaeologists can't find the place. When Jesus joins them, "they stood still, looking sad," stuck, alone on a road *from* disappointment and fear *to* nowhere. When Jesus joins them, they are lost, no longer moving forward, and unable to recognize him—unable to discern the incredible hopeful truth. The road to Emmaus is a hard dark place. The place of lost hope and victorious fear, the place of loneliness, lostness, stuckness, where we no longer notice the signs or believe the reports of hope.

Yeah, we've been there. Each of us has been there. When we hit rock bottom or in the midst of a divorce or after a death that we couldn't bear. When we screwed up our lives or our lives screwed over us. We've been there. Some of us are there now, in the middle of this exile, this wandering in place, this wilderness pacing.

I want to focus in especially on what I think is the nadir of our friends' trip to Emmaus. Our two friends, in their grief and disappointment, encounter the Risen Jesus on Easter Sunday. And instead of running to greet him, arms joyously outstretched and hearts bursting in new belief, they stand still, looking sad. Eventually the three move along but even at the worst moment, Jesus is with them whether they know it or not. In their grief, in their inability to hope, he is there alongside them steady step by step. Whether or not he is recognized has no bearing on whether or not he is there in slightly exasperated compassion. Incognito, he coaches them along, perhaps is the reason they keep walking, showing them slowly what they need to know to encounter joy again.

He gets them down the road, literally and spiritually, then receives their hospitality before becoming their host. And finally, he reveals himself and propels them back into community, back down the road they never should have taken, back into danger with hope and courage. As they head back towards Jerusalem, as far as they know the situation there hasn't changed. As far as they know, their friends are still locked away and the authorities may still be planning a raid

on Jesus' followers. But they have changed; they have been changed gradually gradually and then suddenly.

We, even at our lowest, on whatever has been our road to Emmaus, are unable to escape the love of God. We are unable to outpace the presence of the risen Christ. In our grief and frustration, our boredom and fear, he is here in our living rooms and basements, our laundry rooms and kitchens. Perhaps unrecognized, he is coaching us and teaching us, gently gently beginning to set the pace of our no-place wandering and turning us back toward hope. He is here preparing us to encounter joy again.

Of course, he is revealed to them in exactly what we cannot do together: the breaking of the bread. And if we cannot recognize him, it may not be much comfort to hear that Jesus is here anyway. But my friends, Cleopas and his companion had reason already to be on the lookout for grace and as hard as they were to perceive or believe, they did have clues all along. The women had already brought the good news, and as Jesus taught our friends the scriptures, their hearts burned within them. I encourage us, in our grief and fear, our boredom and anger, to remember the testimony of those we trust. When we ourselves cannot see the signs of hope, we trust those who have reliably taught us to hope before. We lean on those who know well the mysterious paths of grace. And I encourage us to pay attention: to pay attention to the burning of our hearts, the pace of our steps, the direction our feet are taking us. Rest assured, Jesus is always steering us, like Cleopas and companion, toward the communities that hold us and the work that shapes us. Christ is risen and chooses, against all odds, to be with us. Amen. Alleluia.