

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 27, 2025**

**“But We Had Hoped”
Luke 24:13-35**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In our Gospel Lesson, it's the evening of Easter Sunday. “Now on that same day,” Luke writes, “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” (vv. 13-14). Several faithful women had visited the tomb, found it empty, met angelic messengers, and returned to tell their fellow followers of Jesus... But then these two disciples *leave*, and begin a long walk to a town called Emmaus.

And it's on the road to Emmaus that they're met by the Risen Christ—though they don't realize who this stranger is. “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’” (vv. 15-19).

“They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (v. 19). In what follows, we begin to understand why these two disciples left the others, left Jerusalem, left behind the reports of Easter... They had experienced Good Friday, in all its violence and brutality; they had experienced the shocking defeat and death of the one they believed meant life and hope. They speak with absolute certainty about Good Friday—and then they add, with vague hesitation, the reports of resurrection. What's clear is that the news of Easter did not undo the damage of Good Friday, which was their loss of hope.

“*But we had hoped* that he was the one to redeem Israel,” they say; “we *had hoped*” (ἡμεῖς δὲ ἠλπίζομεν). For them, hope is the past tense; hope is something they once had, but have no longer; hope is what they can only remember; hope is what they've lost; they are, put simply, hope-less.

And what's more, their hopelessness appears resistant to any word of hope. Notice, it's not that they weren't aware of the news of Easter; not only had they heard this news, but they were *there*—in person!—when the women returned from the tomb: “some women of our group astounded *us*. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told *us* that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with *us* went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him” (vv. 22-24). They'd heard these first-hand reports...but none of that could chip away at the hopelessness that had already hardened. Easter morning has come and gone, but—for these disciples—the hopelessness of Good Friday had already cemented.

“*But we had hoped* that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21). This loss of any connection to hope—it's sad and poignant. And you know, I think it's poignant for us to hear about this loss of hope—about hope in the past tense—partly because it feels a bit too familiar today. Someone said to me recently; they said, “I think the prevailing feeling in the world right now is that hope is in the past.” It's certainly something I've noticed, this struggle at the loss of hope, not only in the Presbyterian Church in Canada but more broadly in Canadian society.

You may have noticed some loss of hope—and you know, this isn't just our experience, this isn't just anecdotal. It turns out that, in recent years, Statistics Canada has documented a downward trend in hope. In 2022, StatsCan released findings, published under the heading: “Hopefulness is declining across Canada.” The study stated: “The proportion of Canadians reporting a hopeful outlook on the future is substantially lower compared with 5 to 6 years ago.” It added: “In 2016, 75% of people in Canada reported feeling hopeful about the future, compared with 64% of the population in 2021/2022.”

Now we might think, ‘Well, that study was still during the pandemic, which wasn't a particularly hopeful time; so maybe that was just a blip.’ However, just this past September, StatsCan released follow-up findings, which concluded: “In 2024, Canadians of all age groups were feeling less hopeful about the future than they were in 2021.” Let that sink it: last year, Canadians were even less hopeful than they had been during the pandemic! I don't have more recent data, but—considering these few months—I think a sudden upsurge in Canadian hopefulness maybe seems unlikely.

“*But we had hoped...*” When it comes to hopelessness, I think we can really struggle, because—much like those disciples on the Road to Emmaus—our hopelessness can harden like cement. Even the announcement of resurrection—

heard directly from the women who had been to the empty tomb—even that was inadequate to dissolve the hopelessness that had hardened on Good Friday. Likewise, when we lose hope, when we come to believe that what’s wrong now can never be made right, that what’s lost now can never be found, that what’s dead now can never receive new life—that hopelessness can be hard to break...at least alone. At times, we need someone else to speak to us a word of hope; and sometimes we need be the one who speaks that hope.

Personally, in my years as a minister, I’ve often found that my role is about encouraging hope, about trying to spark hope or tend to a hopeful ember. We all need someone to speak hope; we all need to be reminded that, by the grace of God, death does not get the last word, and Good Friday gives way to Easter Sunday. Once, when one of you was going through a really difficult time, I told you: I said, ‘I’m convinced that you are going to get through this—that there will be a future when we will look back at this difficult day, knowing that you got through it.’ And you did get through it; by the grace of God, it turned out there was nothing false about that hope.

On the Road to Emmaus, the one who speaks hope to those hopeless disciples was Christ. It’s a stunning turn in the story: they are hopeless because Christ has died, yet that hardened hopelessness is dissolved by the Risen Christ who comes alongside them and remains with them until they recognize him in the breaking of bread and the teaching of Scripture. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures,” Luke says. “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” (vv. 27 and 30-31).

Likewise, our hopelessness gets dissolved by Christ, who also meets us through the Scriptures and broken bread, through Word and Sacrament. In the church, we are invited both to hear and to share a word of hope, that same Easter hope given to those disciples on the Road to Emmaus—and given to us, by God’s grace, today. Through Word and Sacrament, we recite and retell our story of hope; because the Christian faith is, at its core, a story of hope—that even in the worst moment, even in the depths of loss, even on Good Friday—that even then, hope has a place.

And this hope—it’s far more than optimism. The optimist says that the glass is half full; yet the Christian hope is that this glass, though emptied or drained or broken, will yet be restored and filled to overflowing, by the grace of the God who promises a “cup [that] runneth over” (Psalm 23:5). Hope is not about

downplaying what's wrong with the world; Christian hope acknowledges loss, acknowledges catastrophe, acknowledges tragedy, acknowledges Good Friday—yet insists that, nevertheless, by the grace of God, death and loss will not be permitted the last word.

As Christians, we retell our story of hope in Word and Sacrament; we rekindle our hope, knowing that even the devastation of Good Friday gave way, by God's grace, to the joy of Easter Sunday. And so we may share hope even in the face of hopelessness. As the hymn puts it:

“Let us hope when hope seems hopeless,
when the dreams we dreamed have died.
When the morning breaks in brightness,
hunger shall be satisfied.
One who sows the fields with weeping
shall retrace the sorrowing way
and rejoice in harvest bounty
at the breaking of the day” (Beebe). Amen.