

THE RESURRECTION OF HOPE

Luke 24:13-35

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Third Sunday of Easter

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In one of her books Anne Lamott remembers the old story of a man getting increasingly drunk in a bar in Alaska. “He’s telling the bartender how he recently lost whatever faith he’d had after his twin-engine plane crashed in the tundra.”

“Yeah,” he says bitterly, “I lay there in the wreckage, hour after hour, nearly frozen to death, crying out for God to save me, praying for help with every ounce of my being, but [God] didn’t raise a finger to help. So I’m done with that whole charade.”

“But [wait a minute!]” said the bartender, squinting an eye at him, “You’re here. You *were* saved.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” says the man. “Because finally some [dang] *Eskimo* came along...”¹

Well... yes. The longer I live the more it seems to me that moments of grace and help and rescue happen all the time in our lives, if we but have eyes to see them... but *that*, of course, is precisely the problem. We don’t have the eyes to see them. Too often our eyes are shaded by anger, or occluded by disappointment, or shut tight in fear, or turned away in disillusionment. And so we miss a lot... may even miss the presence of the holy in our midst... especially if the holy comes disguised as, say, an Eskimo... or a stranger on the road.

This story Luke tells of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and how they are joined by a stranger who is not really a stranger is unique to Luke. There are so many rich veins to mine in this story of that first Easter afternoon: the palpable disappointment of the two disciples heading away from Jerusalem after the death of their master... the engaging conversation on the way when their as-yet-unrecognized lord walks beside them... his willingness to stay with them and to break bread with them... the moment of recognition when, in the breaking of bread, they see him for who he is... once he is gone, the powerful remembrance of how he had stirred them as he opened the word to them... and finally, their rush back to tell the others.

There’s so much in this story. It’s odd, I suppose, that time and again, in reading this text, I find myself focusing on one verb. In the Greek it is *ēlpizomen*. The two disciples are telling the stranger what drew them to Jesus, and then, plaintively, they say *ēlpizomen*. It is the imperfect tense, which we don’t have in English. The best translation is probably, “we had been hoping.” We had been hoping that he was the one who was about to liberate Israel.²

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York, Anchor Books, 1999, 117.

² This translation of v. 21 is offered by John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, 481.

They're headed to Emmaus. We don't know precisely where Emmaus was, as Biblical scholar John Carroll notes:

Its precise location remains uncertain, but what matters in Luke's story is that the village is near Jerusalem, so that the walk there and back can be completed in the same day, but also that it is *not* Jerusalem. The ... movement away from Jerusalem bears symbolic meaning: [their] hopes, pinned on Jesus the liberator, have been crushed [and now they just want to get out of town].³

Jesus asks them what they have been discussing, and they tell him of the events that led to the crucifixion, adding plaintively, "We had been hoping that he was the one who was about to liberate Israel." We had been hoping, he says. Cynthia Jarvis says these two disciples are on their way to what the poet T.S. Eliot simply called the "human condition:"

The condition to which some who have gone [so] far...
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation.⁴

They had been hoping and thinking that Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel, an expectation that was built on the belief that the Messiah would come with power to end the Roman occupation and restore the fortunes of Israel. But Jesus' humiliation and cruel death seemed now to have proved that he was *not* the one. So now their eyes are clouded with tears and fears and disappointments. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that though

Luke is the only gospel writer who tells us the story of what happened on that road, ... everyone has walked it at one time or another. It is the road you walk when your team has lost, your candidate has been defeated, your loved one has died – the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again... It is the road of deep disappointment, and walking it is the living definition of sad, just like the two disciples in today's story. Hope in the [imperfect tense, she says, is] one of the saddest sounds a human being can make.⁵

"We had been hoping." Our friend Jon Walton said once, "There, captured in a phrase is all the longing of a people who had hoped, waited, watched and remained vigilant for a messiah and who had found their fulfillment postponed." There are so many people, in Scripture and in everyday life, who have "longed and waited for a promise to be fulfilled, a potential to be realized, a possibility to become a reality, and who wait patiently still, hoping against hope, believing against all odds...."⁶

³ Carroll, 482-483.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950, 139, as cited by Cynthia Jarvis, "Luke 24:13-35: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 419.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Blessed Brokenness," *Gospel Medicine*, Boston, Cowley Publications, 1995, 20.

⁶ Jon Walton, in a paper on this text presented to the January 2005 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Austin, Texas.

I saw an interview this week with a woman in Oklahoma whose family had lost everything in the tornado that had demolished much of her small town. She said there was literally nothing left of the home she and her husband had saved for years to build. “We had so many hopes,” she said.

I think of the couple who came to see me after their third attempt at having a child had ended in another miscarriage, their eyes full of tears. At one point the woman asked me straightaway, “Have you ever had your hopes crushed, Bob? That’s what it feels like. All our hopes have been crushed. And we had so many hopes for a child.” Mercy. The pain of “standing there at the intersection of what is and what might have been.”⁷ We had been hoping, said the disciples. New Testament scholar Richard Swanson says,

I have heard families use that phrase when they were packing up the things they had brought with them to the ICU. “We had [been hoping]...” they say, and then they go home alone. I have heard families use this phrase when addictions return, or jobs go away. Although theologies of hope focus on a dawning future, the moment that catches me is that moment of deep disappointment, when only a painfully imperfect verb tense will express what needs to be said.

We like to hear future tenses [says Swanson]. We like it when families say that everything will be okay, that they will go on, that they will get everything back to normal. We like future tenses so much that we reward people in deep grief for reassuring us that the sun will rise tomorrow and that life will go on. But in this unguarded moment, the walking disciples give voice to a discovery that every adult shares: very often, often when it matters most, we find ourselves speaking of matters of hope ... in the imperfect tense: we had [been hoping]⁸

I think that’s an appropriate word for our time, don’t you? This is not the way this year was supposed to unfold. There are high school and college seniors who had so many plans that have either evaporated or have been put on hold. There are athletes who have trained for years for Olympic competitions that will not be held. There are older adults who have watched their nest eggs fall from the nest. There are people who had dream jobs – or jobs, at least – that are no longer there. There are families with dear ones who were their sons or daughters or parents or grandparents who are suddenly missing from the family table. We had been hoping, they all say.

The gracious thing, the Gospel thing, about this story is that it doesn’t end in hopelessness and despair. The two disciples are understandably downcast, but then, “as the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed,”⁹ they are joined by another traveler, who will remind them of their own story and show them that their hopes have not been in vain. Says Christine Chakoian:

⁷ Jon M. Walton, “The Blessedness of Brokenness,” sermon preached April 13, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York.

⁸ Richard Swanson, Commentary on Luke 24:13-35, on the Working Preacher website, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1992, accessed April 29, 2014.

⁹ John Henry Cardinal Newman’s prayer, as cited by Jarvis, 421.

What a tender word this is: that late in the day, when they're walking along the road, away from the events of the crucifixion, away from the stories of the empty tomb – that late in the day a stranger joins them on their journey. He asks them questions and listens carefully to their answers. And as he walks with them, he helps them see some things they had never understood before; he cares about their puzzling and their struggles.

And then, as they get near the place where they are going, because ... darkness is falling fast, they urge the stranger to come in. And as he takes the bread, and blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it to them, their eyes are opened; and they recognize him. And they finally understand [that their hopes have not been for naught].¹⁰

Hope itself has been raised along with their lord.

This is the season of Easter, friends...even in this hard year. It is the season of promise. It is the season of resurrection. It is a season of confirmation that, with confidence, claims the years ahead for God. This is a season of hope. It is a season to be open to strangers on the road, open maybe even to Eskimos. For indeed, Christ is risen, and hope itself has risen with him. Your hope. And mine. Ours. And because that is true, we can speak in the future tense even now, even in our imperfect world in this imperfect time.

¹⁰ Christine Chakoian, in a paper presented to the 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Danville, California.