

Luke 24:13-35
The Height of Our Hope
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4-1-18

With Jesus, it is not possible for our hope in him to be set too high, only too low.

I invite you to remain standing, as you are able, as we continue to listen to the Easter Gospel as it is told to us in Luke 24.

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ 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 happened.

And skipping down to verse 28...

²⁸ So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, ²⁹ but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”³³ And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, ³⁴ saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

I love this part of the Easter Story. Do you want to know why? What’s the first thing the risen Jesus does with his friends? He plays an April Fool’s Joke on them. A few years ago, my brother in law shared this picture with me.

Jesus, who his friends don’t recognize at the time, meets them on the road and says: Hey guys, what are you talking about as you walk? Cleopas says: Um, have you been living under a rock mister? Didn’t you see what just took place in Jerusalem? To which Jesus coyly replies: What things?

I think in this moment Jesus, realizing the infinitely good news that’s about to be unleashed upon the world, can’t help but playfully have a little fun with his friends. But they can’t see it. Why is that?

Well, just two days ago they watched as their teacher, their rabbi, their friend died, brutally, on a cross, and all that they had hoped for died with him. And when Jesus breathed his last, I wonder if they thought to themselves, the trouble is we set our hopes too high.

Sometimes we don't get what we hope for because we set our hopes too high. But sometimes we don't get what we want because we set our hopes too low.

Every one of us knows the feeling of getting our hopes up, only to have them disappointed. A job interview: sorry, you're not what we're looking for. A doctor's appointment where remission was the hoped-for prognosis. A pregnancy test...negative. When this happens it can be down right gut-wrenching, and maybe someone in this room is in that place this morning, because the good thing you hoped didn't come true. And I know, that many of us—myself included—are tempted to think that the problem was that I set my hopes too high.

If this has ever happened to you, not getting what you hoped for can feel like a catastrophe. But has anyone ever realized, after walking a bit of our Emmaus Roads, that that catastrophe was actually a very good thing, if not the best thing that could have happened to you?

Can I tell you an example from my children's life when something that seemed like a catastrophe at the time was actually the very best thing that could have happened? It involves waterslides.

A few years ago we had a chance to stay in one of those hotels that have a great big water park. You know the kind that don't allow you to see nature because there's a giant waterslide in the way. As we were going to the pool, my daughter Annie took off running toward the kiddie pool. And when she got there she jumped in alongside the 30 or so other 3 year olds. I stepped in with her and immediately thought to myself, this pool is suspiciously warm. I'm pretty sure the top half of was water and the bottom half, all urine. But heaven for Annie in this moment was splashing and laying in this suspiciously warm kiddie pool, and she was probably thinking to herself: I could just stay in this urine filled bath forever! But what she wasn't able to see, but I could, was that right around the corner was a gigantic boulder through which an amazing waterslide wove down to the pool.

When I went to her and said, Annie you should come with me there's something amazing right over there, she didn't want to come. Then when I picked her up to carry her over there she started wailing uncontrollably. But then when she was able to see and experience the sheer bliss of that waterslide, perhaps in her own way she realized that she had set her hopes too low.

When you begin to follow Jesus there will be times when what you hope for will not come true. And it may cause you to freak out, but what I say to you is that with Jesus you cannot set your hopes too high. We will still experience, with the disciples, moments in life that seem like utter devastation in the moment, but, in the same way that I was able to see around the corner something that—for Annie—was infinitely better than a urine filled kiddie pool, Jesus is already at work unfolding our futures before us.

The lesson in this story is this, in the journey of life there are times when we will complain that we don't get what we hope for. And it will be that what we think is best for us is nowhere near what God has in store, if only we will trust him in these moments and walk with him on our road to Emmaus—that is the place where God finally and fully reveals his great plan at work in our lives.

In your bulletin this morning I've included a painting by the Italian Baroque Master Caravaggio called the Supper at Emmaus. What we are seeing in this painting is the exact moment that the disciples realize that not getting what they hoped for is the very best thing that could have happened. This is an Easter painting.

Painting Details:

Incredible detail

17th Century Roman Scene

Disciple on the left is recoiling and leaning in at the same time.

Cleopas is inviting us into this moment of revelation.

I want to turn your attention to a subtle and easily overlooked detail. The man on the right, Cleopas do you see what he has on his lapel? It's a scallop shell. The scallop shell is the traditional emblem of the Apostle James. Legend has it that the body of the Apostle James was transported from Jerusalem to Northern Spain, Galatia where it was buried in the city of Santiago de Compostela. From the 9th century until today people would make a pilgrimage to this place from various places in Spain and France. It's called the Camino de Santiago. And when they do they always had a scallop shell somewhere on their person.

In Caravaggio's time people would take this shell for two reasons: one was to identify themselves as someone on the journey, but the other is a practical purpose. If you were going to take a many hundreds of miles walk, you're not going to carry your provisions with you—that would be too heavy. But what you could bring is a shell. And at the end of the day, in Caravaggio's time a person would knock on the door of a townspeople. Then when the owner opened the door a traveler would hold out his or her scallop shell, as if to say: "I hope you will provide me with this much provision."

Now look back at the painting and the size of the shell on this man's lapel. No more than a handful of oats and a little water, right? But look at the expansive meal that Jesus has set before him. The message is quite plain, if you sit down at the table where Jesus is the host, you can never over-estimate Jesus' expansive generosity. You will always come with your biggest hopes, and they will always be pitifully small in comparison. That's also why Caravaggio painted this meal the way he did, do you see how it is spilling over the table in its lavishness. You cannot out give God, you cannot set your hopes higher than God is able to provide, you will always be surprised by God's abundance.

In his little book *The Weight of Glory* CS Lewis has this wonderful and oft repeated quote:

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

When we come to Jesus with our hopes, no matter how small they may be, he will always surprise us by the magnitude of his generosity. Look again with me at Luke 24, picking up at verse 30.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. In this moment, the same hands that had served the meal to them just a few days ago; the same hands

that were broken and pierced on the cross, were the same hands that were now serving them this same meal. And, Luke says, in this moment their eyes were opened. They were opened to the realization that their hopes for Jesus, hopes that he would stay with them and be for them, helping them with their personal problems, remaining with them to comfort them in their individual struggles, that these hopes were too small.

This Jesus who is now revealed before them did so to reveal that he was not just the Lord over their lives, but that he was Lord over the entire universe—that's quite a bit bigger than our individual problems. But in this story, we also see that Jesus is the one who wants to journey with us on our roads—and sometimes those are long and winding.

Listen, the journey of faith is a wonderful and life changing opportunity, it's the most important decision anyone can make. But I know that there are times when it's difficult, and times when people and things get in the way and keep us from seeing. It was long road to Emmaus, 7 miles. In the bible 7 is the number of completion, walking 7 miles is no small task, and maybe what this little detail implies is that Jesus wants to take that long road with us, for as long as it takes.

I get frustrated with Christian teachers who claim that when Jesus comes into our lives everything magically becomes perfect, we know that's not true. But what Jesus does is kindly, gently, with tenderness and patience walk alongside us as we learn to grow in hope, when we get what we hope for and when we don't.

My prayer for us today, as we move forward in Easter hope, is that we would walk patiently and hopefully with Jesus—both when we get the things we hope for and when we don't. And that when we don't that we would have the bold faith to trust that it is because God has something infinitely better in mind for us. And if you are here this morning because someone promised ham dinner after church, and you are someone who won't darken the doors of a church until next Easter I want you to know that I don't fault you, I'm not upset with you. But here is what I hope for you: that your life would become more and more miserable (what a jerk). Not because I want you to be like or believe like me, but I want you to know the truth that life without Jesus is not what it was meant to be, that without Jesus we are like children lying about in urine-filled kiddie pools when a vast waterpark—an ocean even—available to us in God's grace and love.

The hope of Easter is that eternal life is not too much to hope for, and with Jesus your hope can never be too high!