

Let us pray: Lord Jesus may our hearts burn within us. May we arise, again, today.
Amen.

“We had hoped. . . .”

Those are sad words on the lips of the two disciples in this morning’s gospel reading.

“We had hoped. . . .”

Have you ever been disappointed with God? Maybe your hopes were running high, and then things happened that you didn’t see coming. Maybe you felt like God let you down. The two disciples in our gospel story had lost hope. They had packed it up, called it quits, and were walking back home on the dusty road to Emmaus.

It’s still the first day of the week. Easter afternoon. After Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion, our two disciples had been laying low, hiding out behind locked doors with the other disciples in Jerusalem. Their hopes and dreams had been shattered.

King Jesus was supposed to charge up to Pilate’s porch with legions behind him and blast the enemies. The disciples had hoped for victory over their Roman over-lords. For a glorious triumph over the unjust systems of government and religion that had colluded for evil. They had hoped for a return to the golden glory days of King David. For a transfer of power and place of privilege. This time with King Jesus on the throne.

They were sure this Jesus was the One who could do it. They had seen his mighty deeds and felt the power of his words. They had the script all written.

Instead, King Jesus received a crown of thorns and a cross for a throne, a purple robe drenched in his own blood. And now he was dead. The Kingdom movement had failed. That’s not what they were expecting. They didn’t see it coming. They had hoped things would be so very different.

No one was looking for a crucified Messiah in Jesus' day. We could probably say that is true today, too.

But God often fulfills promises to us in ways we don't yet understand. And by doing so, shows us an alternative vision of what life, itself, could look like, and how it could be lived.

As they walk the road back to Emmaus, with their tails tucked between their legs, the two disciples are having a rather intense conversation; they are debating and batting ideas around. They are confused and perplexed. They are so preoccupied with their own disappointments and dashed hopes that they seem incapable of interpreting the meaning of these recent events. They are not able to recognize the risen Jesus walking alongside them.

Nor did they realize they were about to take part in one whopper of a Bible study.

Who likes a good Bible study? Don't you kind of wish you could have been there, as Jesus opened the Scriptures to them? What passages did he use? How did he do it? Was it like Spock on Star Trek doing a Vulcan mind meld?

As Jesus opened the scriptures to them, the text says their hearts began to burn inside them. Don't we long for our hearts to burn within us, too?

Maybe you have sensed the power of the risen Christ stirring your heart as you study Scripture. Or had times when certain words or phrases seemed to almost leap off the page at you, or light up your eyes. And you sensed the Holy Spirit stirring within you, nudging you, preparing you for a deeper revelation of God in your life.

These two disciples had all the information. They had all the facts. They knew their scriptures. They had even hung out with Jesus. And hadn't Jesus told them numerous times that the Messiah would suffer, die, and on the third day be raised to life? They even knew the tomb was empty. Yet, the news of the empty tomb only baffled them. As for the reports from some of the women claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead,

the disciples thought those women were nuts! Who sees visions of angels anymore? Especially not women...

Thank God for faithful women.

These disciples had the all the facts. But still could not see. The issue was a matter of the heart. They were “slow of heart to believe.” Isn’t that really the most stinging indictment that we can have? That the trouble just might be with us, in our hearts, not in our knowing of the “facts.”

And then I wonder about the spiritual condition of my own heart. Are there things that the risen Christ wants to speak into my life that my heart is slow to believe? Are there narratives that I am so vested in that make it difficult to see other possibilities? Could my own desires and preconceived notions about Jesus be blinding me to the real Jesus?

One of the perplexing things about the resurrection appearances is that the disciples are often divinely prevented from recognizing Jesus right away. Jesus was walking and talking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Why would that be? And for us, too, isn’t it so often only in hindsight that we recognize God’s presence with us? Sometimes it seems we have to get a little farther down the road before we are ready and able to see the road behind us more clearly. We are learning to walk by faith. We are learning to trust in the God who loves us deeply.

Do you know how much God loves you? That God desires to be with you. That God loved you so much that he died for you, even before you recognized your need for a savior? It doesn’t matter if you are walking down the wrong path, heading in the wrong direction, or if you have been heading down that path your whole life. God loves you wherever you are at. And will come alongside you, and walk with you, and help you.

In the Gospel story, new creation happens to our two disciples in “the breaking of the bread.” It was then their eyes were opened to the risen Christ in their midst. It was then that they recalled how their hearts had been burning as Jesus opened the scriptures to

them. It was then when the words of the living Word were brought into their remembrance: “Do this, Jesus said, in remembrance of me.”

It was then they arose and returned.

It is to be the same for us, today. Remembering is for our arising and returning. This remembering is not because Jesus is absent. It is a remembrance by which we encounter our risen Lord in Word and Sacrament, in the reading of Scripture and the in bread and the wine. Then we arise and return on paths of more miraculous journeys with God.

Life with God is an adventure. But that does not mean it is easy. The First Peter reading talks about how our Christian walk is one of continual arising and returning over and over again, as a process of the will. Arising even in the face of opposition and persecution. Arising, even in the midst of our pain and anguish. Arising even when things appear dark and hopeless. Arising because we know that *even suffering is not devoid of purpose in God’s hands (Pr Amy Hessel).

And then, returning, or responding. An encounter with the risen Christ always requires a response. But it remains up to us whether and how we choose to do so. The disciples could have thought what had happened was pretty cool, and then make the decision to remain reclined on their comfortable sofas, finishing off the wine. Instead, with a great sense of urgency, they got up (arose) and ran (returned) all the way back to Jerusalem in the middle of the night to share the Good News. He is risen! He is with us!

And as we continue to follow and respond to where the risen Jesus is leading us, our heart-life is transformed. Every remembrance gives us the opportunity to re-experience what this is all about. And what it’s always all about is love. It is always about love. But sometimes love can be really hard. That’s our basic problem. Love is something we have to work at, especially loving others deeply, and sacrificially, as brothers and sisters, like God wants us to do. The risen Jesus walks with us to transform our earthly orientation from fear and death and self, to one of transcendent hope and abundant life for all, because loving God means loving and caring for the world God loves.

We are all on journeys of one sort or another. Did you notice that one of the disciples in gospel lesson was unnamed? I think this is the Holy Spirit's way of telling us that the unnamed disciple in the story is us. Like the disciples in our story, today some of us may be walking in the wrong direction and don't even know it. Today some of us may be tired, confused, discouraged and disappointed. Perplexed and overwhelmed by health concerns, family issues, finances, or maybe national and world problems. Some of us have been walking on the long road of despair to Emmaus since last fall.

The Emmaus story tells us that while we might not know all the ups and downs life will bring, and while we might not see all the answers, we can trust that Jesus is with us, even when we don't quite see him. He meets us on the roads of life, so that we can walk with him.

I've heard people comment from time to time that the Christian life seems dull and boring. I can't think of anything farther from the truth. We follow an invisible ever present Jesus – how amazing is that! – who reveals himself to us in Word and Sacrament, but also mysteriously in the midst of the basic moments of life, in our everyday activities, in our conversations, and on the roads we travel. Our job is to remain open, to arise and respond. To follow where he leads. The real question for us in our lives is: "What are you doing today, Jesus? And how can I be part of it?" May we ask these questions, and arise together, with burning hearts, for the next leg of the adventure. Amen.