

Jim Vitale  
4/26/20

The Road  
Luke 24:13-35

Pr Jim's Sermon  
Sunday, April 26, 2020  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Luke 24:13-35

"Christ on the Road"

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Troxelville, just a few miles away from Beavertown. As they walked along the road, the pair kept six feet apart. Their face masks made their ears sore and muffled their voices as they discussed everything that was happening. As they walked, a stranger came up behind them. He wore no mask and began to walk between them.

"What are you two talking about?" the man asked, taking his place between the other two.

Startled by his sudden appearance, the others jumped. Perturbed by his lack of facemask and social distance they took a few sideways steps away from this interloper.

One of them, whose name was Cleo, replied, "Are you the only stranger in Snyder County who does not know the things that have taken place here in these days?"

"What things?" The stranger replied.

"The things about the Pandemic! This terrible virus that has stopped the world, killed as many people as the flu in a fraction of the time, and forced us all to be shut up in our homes. We had hoped that God was with us... but it's been six weeks and nothing's changed." As Cleo continued, the gravel crunched under her feet, like a metronome for her grief.

To me, one of the most heartbreaking lines in all of scripture is this statement in our gospel reading from Cleopas: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

"We had hoped." So much is contained in those three words. They betray Cleopas' faith, his excited expectation that this Jesus person was actually going to redeem Israel; and they betray his despair, his great disappointment that his dream of redemption has died with this failed messiah.

Expectations for redemption were powerful in the first century and near to the heart of every Jew. For centuries the Jewish people had hoped that a messiah would come and restore Israel to its former glory. The prophet Isaiah says that the messiah will be called Imanu-El which means God with us; for many, the absence of a messiah meant the absence of God. Exiled, enslaved, and subjugated by foreign empires, many in Israel wondered if God was really with them at all. The people longed for their freedom, not just because they wanted freedom, but because that freedom would prove to them that God was still with them. In the midst of a hard

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life, Cleopas saw in Jesus a future; and then that future was torn away. What could be more tragic than the loss of hope?

Last week I mentioned Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*.

The book takes place in the future, and follows a father and son as they traverse the bleak landscape of a desolated America. Some great cataclysmic event like nuclear war has halted all life, save for the handfuls of humans who managed to survive. Skies are blackened, trees crumble to ash, food is scarce. The man and the boy struggle to survive not only these deathly conditions, but also the constant threat of violence by marauding gangs. The whole story takes place on a road as the man and the boy seek safety in the south.

The story is as bleak as the landscape: broken, bloody, and hopeless.

And yet, throughout the story the father continually reminds the son that he carries *the fire*.

*The fire* is, among other things, hope. It is the spark of life, the act of love, the desire for that which is good, the expectation of a future.

At one point, as the man and the boy face separation, they share this exchange:

"You have to carry the fire." The father says.

"I don't know how to." The boy replies.

"Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it."

Throughout this book that is unrelentingly violent and bleak, there burns a faint light, the belief that even in the midst of circumstances that seem utterly hopeless, hope can still remain.

We, too, walk the road. Our road may not take us through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, it may not wander the hills of Palestine, but it is still hard.

As we wander the path of pandemic, it is easy to give into the same despair that Cleopas and his companion felt. Cleopas, like so many others in the first century, had hoped not only for the restoration of Israel, but for the reassurance that God was still with him. But after Jesus'

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crucifixion he no longer sees God's presence and so he wonders if he has been completely abandoned.

Here in 2020, we, like Cleopas, had hoped that God was with us, too. We had hoped that in the midst of a desperate situation God would show us that God is near. We had hoped...

At Bible and Brew on Tuesday night, we talked a little about how, despite the fact that we have moved on to celebrate Easter, some of us still feel as though we are stranded on Good Friday. We have been shut in the tomb and until we are able to return to a normal life, nothing is going to change that. Easter cannot come, resurrection cannot come, until our exile is ended, until our stone has been rolled away.

As I read the story of the road to Emmaus, I feel as though I am walking with Cleopas, wondering if God is really with me, struggling to find signs of God's presence in this bleak situation. I have not yet arrived at the house, I have not broken the bread, I have not experienced the big reveal. For now, I am on the road, walking with my questions, wondering about the future.

And truthfully, that's an okay place to be. As Cleopas laments the death of the messiah and the death of his hope, Jesus does not interrupt him; he lets him grieve; he lets him talk; he lets him feel what he's feeling.

It may feel like we walk alone, my brothers and sisters. But the good news for us today is this: Jesus walks beside us whether we know it or not. The irony of today's reading is that Cleopas laments being abandoned by God while God walks right beside him. There are times in our lives when we can feel God's presence with us; and there are times in our lives when we can't. Today may feel like one of those days when God is absent. But if the story of the road to Emmaus tells us anything, it's that Jesus *always* walks beside us, whether we know it or not.

We have hope in the midst of hopeless situations because we know that Jesus is with us, even when we don't feel it, even when we can't see it.

So carry the fire.  
Christ is with you.

Amen.