

“It Ain’t Over”

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

My father and I shared a love of baseball and would attend several major league games together every year. Because tickets to Yankees games were often difficult to obtain, we would drive down to Philadelphia to attend Phillies’ games at Veterans Stadium. Since many of the Phillies’ teams were not that good, tickets were typically easy to purchase, and we could get good seats to enjoy games that featured many of the great teams of the National League. We loved the game so much that we always stayed to the end, even if the score was lopsided (usually against the Phillies) and we could never understand why people would leave the ballpark before the end of the game. Unlike sports such as football, basketball, and hockey that are played according to a timeclock, baseball is measured by innings that can go on for an undetermined amount of time. Even if one team is behind by several runs, it is always possible for them to make a comeback in the last inning and win the game. As Yogi Berra so famously stated, “it ain’t over until it’s over!” One memorable example of this was a game in which the Phillies were down by five runs going into the bottom of the ninth inning – their last chance. Many people had begun leaving the stadium after the eighth inning, assuming the game was lost; but the home team surprised everyone by staging a furious comeback, at which point people began to return to their seats. Someone out in the parking lot must have informed them of what was happening back on the field, and that in leaving too soon they risked witnessing a great victory. When catcher Darren Daulton hit a game-winning three run homer, many of those returnees were among the crowd who were witnesses to the victory that came after some had assumed that all was lost.

All must have seemed lost to Jesus’ followers following his death on Good Friday. All their hopes that he was the Messiah, the redeemer of God’s people, the one who would fulfill what had been spoken by the prophets in the Old Testament appeared to have died with him at Golgotha. When he was placed in the tomb, it was the final chapter in the story of a man in whom many had placed their trust, a confidence that now appeared to have vanished. The women who had witnessed where his body had been laid returned on Sunday morning to merely complete the burial rituals for his body. But when they came to the tomb, they found that the stone that had sealed it was rolled away and the body was absent. Instead, they found “two men in dazzling clothes” who spoke to them the startling news that *“he is not here, but has risen”* and reminded them *“how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again”* (Luke 24:5-6). The women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women with them” – run and report what they have seen and heard to the apostles; but their *“words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them”* (24:11). Instead, Peter ran to the tomb and sees the linen clothes in which Jesus’ body had been wrapped lying by themselves – but Jesus was not there, so Peter went home, *“amazed at what had happened.”* (24:12).

At the beginning of today’s Gospel reading, the scene shifts from Peter who had gone home wondering what had happened to two others from among “all the rest” of Jesus’ followers who are also traveling home after having traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. Their destination is Emmaus, a village located *“about seven miles from Jerusalem”* (24:13); they are leaving Jerusalem not only because the feast has ended but because

all their hopes had apparently ended with the death of Jesus. There was no reason to stay in the city where Jesus had died, so they had decided to return to their homes and get on with their lives in the best way possible. As they are making their homeward journey, they are so engrossed in conversation *"about all these things that had happened"* (24:14) that they barely noticed that a third traveler has joined them on the road. While Luke identifies this traveler as Jesus (the first time the Risen Lord appears in Luke's Gospel) these disciples do not recognize him because *"their eyes were kept from recognizing him"* (24:16). Jesus initiates the conversation, asking them what they were discussing, a question that stops them in their tracks: *"they stood still, looking sad"* (24:17). One of the two, now identified as Cleopas, seemed to be stunned that this fellow traveler is apparently *"the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days"* (24:18). The irony of Cleopas' question is that while he assumes that Jesus is the only one who does not know what has happened, Jesus is in fact the only one who *does* know the meaning of all that has happened. *"The two disciples assume they know much more about what has happened than the stranger who has joined them."* (Alan Culpepper).

When Jesus asks them "what things?" the two travelers offer a summary of the events that transpired in Jerusalem *"about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all people"* (24:19), the one who was condemned to death and crucified. For them, Jesus' crucifixion was the end of the story, since *"we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel"* (24:21). By speaking of Jesus as the hoped-for Redeemer of Israel, the disciples echo the words of the prophet Isaiah (*"I will help you, says the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel"* – Isaiah 41:14). They *had* hoped – past tense – that the promises of Scripture were about to be fulfilled. They *had* hoped that Jesus would fulfill God's promises, but they saw his death – which was the fulfillment of these promises – as only the frustration of their hope. They had forgotten that when Jesus had predicted his passion and death, he had also promised that *"on the third day he will rise again."* (Luke 18:33). Cleopas does report on the women's witness to the empty tomb and *"a vision of angels who said that he was alive"* (24:23), but this did not convince them to remain in Jerusalem or to see any hope beyond Good Friday.

Still unrecognized by these disciples, Jesus responds by beginning a process of revealing himself and his resurrection to his fellow travelers. The revelation of the Easter reality begins with the fulfillment of Scripture. He chastises them, lamenting *"how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!"* (24:25). The suffering of the Messiah was necessary in God's providential plan for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of sinful humanity (*"But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation"* – Luke 17:25); it is only after suffering will the Messiah *"enter into his glory"* (24:26). Jesus takes on the role of teacher as he *"outlines for them the meaning and significance of his own death, starting with Moses and the prophets. It was 'necessary' that Jesus would suffer, die, rise, and be lifted up into 'glory.'"* (Eric Barreto).

The travelers still do not recognize Jesus when they reach their destination and *"he walked ahead as if he were going on"* (24:28); seeing that it was *"almost evening and the day is now nearly over,"* they invite Jesus to stay with them, practicing the hospitality that is a hallmark of Middle Eastern culture (as practiced by Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18). Jesus accepts their hospitality and joins them at their dinner table, where he *"took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them."* (24:30). This simple meal becomes a moment of *anagnorisis*, the recognition scene in classical drama. The recognition occurs after Jesus blesses the bread and share it with his hosts: *"then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."* (24:31). The two had not recognized Jesus on the road, but at the table they saw who he was – not by their own efforts or abilities, but when their eyes were opened to recognize that the

one with whom they shared table fellowship was indeed the Risen Lord. In feeding them, *“Jesus opens their eyes, helping them see that Jesus is with them the whole time.”* (Barreto).

At first, the two disciples are stunned: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”* (24:32). They immediately get up from the table and return to Jerusalem, realizing that they had left the city too soon before the story of Jesus had reached its fulfillment. When they arrive, they discover that *“eleven and their companions”* had not left but were still gathered. Before they can relate their experience with the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, the others share with them the good news that *“the Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”* (24:34); this was a central part of the proclamation of the Easter Gospel in the early church including Paul’s teaching in his first letter to the Corinthians:

- *“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared to me.”* – 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

Only after they hear of the appearance of the Risen Lord to Peter do the returnees from Emmaus get a chance to share their experience on the road and at the table, *“how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”* (24:35).

The experience of the travelers to Emmaus is a story for those of us who may feel that hope is a distant memory, that any good news is behind us. While these disciples returned to their home voluntarily, we have been compelled to stay at home during this pandemic, encouraged to “shelter in place” in order to prevent the spread of this deadly virus. While our homes are a place of shelter and sanctuary, the place where we are loved, home in this era can also become a place of isolation and despair, where we become increasingly anxious about what is happening in our world today and what our world will be like tomorrow. We may feel as lost and adrift as Cleopas and his companion, turning our backs to hope that appears to be in the past even as we look to a future that is “an unknown country.”

But as their despair was transformed into blazing joy when they recognized that the Risen Lord Jesus Christ was with them, so do we live in that living hope because we know that *“the Lord is risen indeed,”* and that as he pursued those who had assumed that the story was over and all hope was lost, so is our Lord present with us even as we are separated from one another. As Christ’s presence was recognized when his disciples invited him to their table, so do we have the assurance that our Lord is with us when we invite him, in the words of the simple children’s table grace, to *“come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.”* Because we have been *“born anew to a living hope”* in our crucified and risen Lord, we know that Christ is with us always, that hope did not die on Good Friday but was fulfilled, and that the Gospel is the message of both Christ’s death and his resurrection, that in dying he put an end to the powers of sin, death and the devil so that we might *“belong to him, live under his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.”* (Small Catechism).

- “Luke here tells us that the living Christ is both the key to our understanding the Scriptures and the very present Lord who is revealed to us in the breaking of bread. His presence at the table makes all believers first-generation Christians and every meeting place Emmaus.” – Fred Craddock.

If the people who had left the Phillies game early had not been told that the home team was mounting a comeback, they would not have returned and witnessed the team’s victory. They would have assumed that all was lost, not knowing the good news that victory was the final word for that game. For those who follow the path of the travelers to Emmaus, who had turned their backs on Jerusalem assuming that all was lost when Christ died on the cross, our Lord comes them with the message that “it ain’t over until it’s over,” that the Gospel message is not complete without the good news that *“in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died”* (1 Corinthians 15:20). For those who are drifting away aimlessly in hopelessness and despair, for those isolated in their homes wondering if they will ever see light again, for those who believe that all is lost – the good news of Easter is that the Gospel story isn’t finished until all know that Christ the Lord is risen, and because he lives we shall live also. The story does not end in despair; the end is life.

- “Because Jesus lives we too may live, with as much time as God gives us, free from fear of the past, free from fear of the future ... He tells us that he has come in Jesus Christ that we may have life and that we may have it more abundantly. Because he lives, so, too, may we. Life begins, my friends, when you discover this truth for yourselves, and act upon it.” – Peter Gomes.

Those who had remained in Jerusalem experienced the good news that is the conclusion of the Gospel story, that *“the Lord is risen indeed.”* Those who left the city were pursued by our Lord as a shepherd pursues the lost sheep so that they might also know the good news that indeed “Christ has died,” but also that “Christ is risen” and “Christ will come again,” for the message we proclaim is that *“in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* (Ephesians 2:13).

- “[The disciples] must share the good news. Having been turned from sadness and despair by having been at table with Christ they now recognized, their excitement moves them naturally toward their brothers and sisters who have been trapped in the same hopelessness ... The message that creates a believing community needs to be heard again and again by that community. To do so is to confirm, strengthen, encourage, and deepen faith.” – Craddock.

May we continue to strengthen and encourage each other during these days when we are apart so that we may continue to abide in that living hope that *“it ain’t over,”* because **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.