

WE HAD HOPED...

[Luke 24:13-35](#); Third Sunday of Easter, a
April 6, 2008

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Prayer: There's a lot going on this week-end in Memphis, and a lot going on here this morning at Idlewild, O God. So we ask that you will give us good ears, that we may hear the mandate from your son, our Risen Lord, and listen for assurance. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We all have our stories to tell.

It was an exciting time to be a student at John Marshall High School in Richmond Virginia during the spring of 1968. Tense at times, but exciting. There was change and unrest in the air around our country, and the high school I went to was a microcosm of that. My freshman year I went out for the basketball team and made it. There was one African-American on the team. By the time I was a senior, I was the only white person on the team.

But 40 years and two days ago I was at a friend's house, and we were on a committee making plans for the junior-senior prom. "Evening in Venice" was the theme. Though the school was by now about half-black and half-white, those planning the prom were all white. And we were busy making decorations and planning refreshments when word came that Dr. King had been shot and killed.

And some of my friends applauded. There were comments made that I have never been able to even repeat; mercifully, I've forgotten some of them. These were good Christians. Went to church; active in youth groups. They loved Jesus, I'm sure. And they applauded.

I didn't, but that doesn't make me any less culpable, because I didn't say anything. Not a word. Didn't walk out. Didn't challenge anyone. Didn't ask for a moment of silence. I didn't want to make waves and jeopardize my popularity. I just wanted to put on a good prom, so I went about my business. And I went home that night and heard the cock crow three times.

Several months later, the Poor People's Campaign marched through Richmond on their way to Washington D.C. to try to complete the job that Dr. King had left unfinished. This was a march for economic rights, not just civil rights. They camped out at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education one night, where my mother worked, and where we lived. So we fed them. Invited a few of them into our home and heard them talk about why they felt it was important to walk from the Mississippi delta to the nation's capital. They told their stories in quiet, poignant ways. And those two events have shaped my world view, my theology, and my spiritual development about as much as anything through the years.

We all have stories to tell, and some of you were much more directly involved in the events here in Memphis 40 years ago. And it has become a cliché, but I'm going to say it anyway because it's the truth: We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go.

Heaven knows, we have come a long way. I was reminded of this not too long ago when I visited one of my African-American clergy friends in his office. There weren't any windows in his office. "Nice view," I said. "Where are the windows?" He replied, "Black pastors in the south did not want to have windows in their offices back then. It could have been a death sentence."

We have come a long way, by the grace of God, but heaven knows we still have a long way to go. In fact, it is very easy for some of us who are concerned about economic disparities and racial injustice and peace to yield to despair. Frankly, I do not recall a time in my lifetime when people seemed less expectant. I heard a report recently on the Cabrini Green sections of Chicago, (do you realize that 20 students have been killed in the schools there this year?) that stated that the dominant topic of conversation in that inner city ghetto is not what to wear for the prom, but how they will be dressed for their funeral. We know all too well the economic woes of the poor and wars that rage despite every effort at peace. And the races keep talking past each other without sitting down and trying to understand one another. We are so far from the beloved community that Dr. King envisioned. It is easy to despair.

It is a mood not greatly dissimilar from the mood we perceive in two despondent disciples, three days after Jesus' death, trudging down that dusty road to Emmaus, a town with no significance whatsoever, (archeologists and biblical scholars have never been able to find Emmaus!), except that it was seven miles away from where they were. It is late in the day, and they cannot hide their fatigue and disappointment. The daylight is fading into evening, and the sun is nearly set, not only on this day, but on their best hopes and deepest longings.

Remember their words, among the most poignant in all of scripture? "We had hoped...that he was the one to redeem Israel," to set things right, to usher in the reign of peace. We had hoped. But we look around and, well, what has really changed? We had hoped. In that one phrase, all the longing of a people is captured, people who had hoped, waited, watched for such a Messiah and now ... now they were heading back to Emmaus.

Oh, they had heard reports of an empty tomb, but that was mainly woman talk. Too preposterous to believe. A resurrection from the dead? They had heard such talk, but... that's crazy. That will never happen! A world without violence, without greed, without poverty, without class jealousies or racial injustice? It will never happen.

Well, look what happened to those two Emmaus travelers, once they had time to ponder it all. They took the time to sit down over supper with the stranger they had met along the way, listened as he unpacked the scriptures with them, explaining, interpreting what all the prophets had said. They began to see that Easter was not a cultural mutation, but the culmination of all God had been trying to get across from the beginning, an audacious vision of life in all its fullness beyond anything human beings had ever envisioned before, a vision of men and women, children and old people, of every race and hew living together in harmony and hope, without greed, without violence, without jealousy, without ignorance.

It all happened because they urged the stranger to come in. They offered basic hospitality to this perfect stranger. And as he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And they finally got it.

In the breaking of the bread, they recognize him. In the breaking of the bread, so much more happened than the feeding of their hunger. There they understood the way beyond despair, beyond a much deeper hunger and hurt.

Madeline L'Engle, who died last year, kept a journal as her husband was dying, and she remembers the day when he first proposed to her. She remembers that he quoted Conrad Aiken's poetry:

*Music I heard with you was more than music.
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.¹*

So it was in Emmaus, too. Bread that was more than bread, for it had the power to open eyes, and there they recognized Jesus.

And who knows when it might happen to us, such a moment when we recognize Christ in our midst? In the face of a dear friend, or the face of a stranger on the road; in the face of a person sitting next to us in the pew, or maybe in the face of a child getting a bible; maybe others might see the face of Christ in you, as you feed the homeless, or offer clean, safe drinking water to a young woman in Ghana, or maybe, just maybe, we might find the Risen Christ in the face of one across the table.

We had hoped, hadn't we? We had hoped that we would be much closer to the realization of the Beloved Community that Dr. King envisioned. What it takes, I suppose, is having our eyes opened. Many couldn't see it back then, because Dr. King questioned the very soul and fiber of our most cherished assumptions about ourselves as Americans are standing in the great, biblical prophetic tradition of our faith. It was hard to hear that then, and it's hard to hear it now. (Witness the response to a 10 second video clip of Jeremiah Wright. How quick we are to judgment without taking the time to look at the transcript of the entire sermon, or the context in which he serves.) It discomforts many of us today, but it is that prophetic tradition that enabled that tiny band of nobodies called disciples to catch a vision of the promises and the purposes of God that enabled them to see beyond the puny little possibilities of their implausible world, to the impossible possibilities of God, led by the Risen Christ who was in their midst all along.

If we keep on coming to this table, we just might recognize Christ in our midst today, and see that even amid the doubts and sorrows, we might get it: he has been with us; he has been with us all along.

I think one of Dr. King's finest moments took place in those dark, dark days after 4 precious little girls had been killed by a bomb in a Birmingham church in 1963. The tensions, the anger, the frustrations, and the hatred had never been higher. But at the eulogy, he said:

“In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor much we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. We must not lose faith in our white brothers and sisters. We must believe that even the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human beings.”

Then he went on: “Through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.” He ended his sermon with a quote from Shakespeare’s Horatio: “Good night, sweet princesses, may the flight of angels take thee to thy eternal rest.”²

We would do well to remember that God walks with us, and meets us wherever we break bread together. So after coming to the table, may we go forth from here pledged amid our despair and ambiguities, to remember Martin with gratitude and chagrin, to dream as he did, to walk the walk, to talk the talk of the coming Kingdom of God with the sure and certain conviction that we have met the Risen Christ at table, and join the old African American preacher who said:

“We ain’t what we oughta be; We ain’t what we wanta be.
But thank God Almighty, we ain’t what we used to be!”

Amen.

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¹ Conrad Aiken, “Music I Heard”; from Madeline L’Engle, *Two-Part Invention: The Story of a Marriage*.

² James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Harper and Row, 1986, p. 222–223.

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13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, **14** and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, **16** but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. **17** And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. **18** Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” **19** He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, **20** and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over 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 took place.

22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, **23** and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. **24** Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” **25** Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! **26** Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” **27** Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. **28** As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. **29** But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. **30** When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. **31** Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. **32** They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” **33** That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. **34** They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” **35** Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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