

Romans 8:18-25

March 13, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Luke 24:13-35, focused on verses 17-21a

Second Sunday of Lent

BUT WE HAD HOPED . . .

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here are the first two paragraphs of Masha Gessen’s February 23 article in *The New Yorker*, entitled “The Crushing Loss of Hope in Ukraine.”

“‘Are you listening to Putin?’ is not the kind of text message I expect to receive from a friend in Moscow. But that’s the question my closest friend asked me on Monday, when the Russian President was about twenty minutes into a public address in which he would announce that he was recognizing two eastern regions of Ukraine as independent countries and effectively lay out his rationale for launching a new military offensive against Ukraine. I was listening—Putin had just said that Ukraine had no history of legitimate statehood. When the speech was over, my friend posted on Facebook, ‘I can’t breathe.’

“Fifty-four years ago, the Soviet dissident Larisa Bogoraz wrote, ‘It becomes impossible to live and to breathe.’ When she wrote the note, in 1968, she was about to take part in a desperate protest: eight people went to Red Square with banners that denounced the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. I have always understood Bogoraz’s note to be an expression of shame—the helpless, silent shame of a citizen who can do nothing to stop her country’s aggression. But on Monday I understood those words as expressing something more, something that my friends in Russia were feeling in addition to shame: ***the tragedy that is the death of hope.***”¹ (emphasis added)

“The tragedy that is the death of hope” – surely that is what Cleopas and his companion were struggling with as they stood still looking sad and told the stranger on the road “about all these things that had happened” over the weekend in Jerusalem. “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel . . .” ***We had hoped . . .*** but now? Dreams die hard.

But we had hoped . . . the COVID-19 pandemic would burn out after a few months.

But we had hoped . . . the biopsy results would be negative.

But we had hoped . . . all of the hard work and commitment would result in the big promotion.

But we had hoped . . . life would be more predictable and less uncertain the older we got.

But we had hoped . . . we would get to see our loved one one last time.

But we had hoped . . . the money would not run out.

But we had hoped . . . we would see peace in our lifetime.

But we had hoped . . .

In his comments about this Emmaus Road story, Brian Konkol notes, “With these four profound words, we not only learn to relate with all that Cleopas and others were feeling immediately after the death of Jesus. We are also inspired to name and claim those moments of surprising disappointment that we also often experience. When dreams appear to shatter and our plans for the future do not match up with what has actually occurred, at times we react with anger and try to pass blame. Yet perhaps most of all, we are left wondering – like Cleopas and other disciples – where was God in the midst of it all? Was God not with us? Where was God when our secure and predictable future suddenly became insecure and unpredictable? Where was God when we felt pain by no fault of our own? Where was God when we cried, screamed, and shouted with sadness? Where was God when the path forward seemed to crumble and we were left to wonder how the pieces could be placed back together? But we had hoped...”²

Someone said this week, “I don’t really want to watch the news, but I can’t help myself. I can’t not watch the news.” And when we do, the images are heartbreaking, gut-wrenching – huge numbers of civilians, mostly women and children, on the road to wherever they hope they can find safety, carrying with them as much as they could stuff in a single suitcase. In Monday night’s Bible study, Dr. Dan said, “The people on the road in Ukraine are probably feeling just like Cleopas and his companion. They are in shock, worn out, scared, tired, and wondering what the future holds.” Dr. Dan said, “Don’t you know those people on the road in Ukraine are talking with each other about all the things that have happened there? And it’s not just the events of the invasion itself, but what the war means for their lives today and in the future.”

There’s an old saying, “you can’t get to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday.” The temptation is to focus on Jesus’s resurrection glory and turn away from his suffering on the cross. We might be tempted to do the same thing with this Emmaus Road story. Imagine if we could time-travel back to that first Easter Sunday afternoon and walk with Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus Road. Surely we would be tempted to say, “Cheer up, guys! The story has a happy ending. Don’t look so sad!” But how many times do we say those kinds of things in this present life, because we’re too uncomfortable with the other person’s pain and sorrow? Don’t get me wrong! The Emmaus Road story does have a joyful ending, but we can’t ignore the death of hope for Cleopas and his companion after that horrific weekend.

In an article called “Hope for This World,” Yale Divinity School professor John Hare writes, “When the philosopher Immanuel Kant asked what were the main questions of philosophy, his answer was ‘What can we know?’, ‘What should we do?’, ‘What is a human being?’, and ‘What can we hope for?’ This last question caused him difficulty. He was clear about what we should hope for in our lives as a whole, including the next life: we should hope that God will bring the union of virtue and happiness. Kant was here translating the vision from Psalm 85 that righteousness and peace (shalom) will embrace. But his difficulty was with what we should hope for in *this* life.”³

That’s the dilemma of our lives, isn’t it? Maybe we have hope for some future resurrection life, but we have trouble seeing how that makes any difference right now

as we wait for test results or watch the evening news or ache with loneliness. Maybe we're skittish about putting our hope in anything or anyone because we've been burned before. Maybe it's hard to know what to hope for in *this* life because we remember having our hope crushed before and we were left wondering: Where was God in the midst of it all? Was God not with us? Where was God when our secure and predictable future suddenly became insecure and unpredictable? Where was God when we felt pain by no fault of our own? Where was God when we cried, screamed, and shouted with sadness? Where was God when the path forward seemed to crumble and we were left to wonder how the pieces could be placed back together?

The road to Emmaus story reminds us that while Cleopas and his companion were talking about all the things that had happened and probably wondering "Where was God?", Jesus was right there on the road with them, walking with them, listening to their story, meeting them where they were in their hopelessness, and ministering to them. As Jesus walked and talked with them, he bridged their hopes from the past and their hopes for the future to give them a hope for that very day.

We use the word "hope" fairly casually. I hope my team wins the ACC tournament. I hope it doesn't rain on my wedding day. I hope my flight isn't delayed. I hope gas prices go down soon. I hope we don't have a hurricane this summer.

Christian hope, however, is more than a wish or a want, no matter how important that wish or want might be to us. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica, he wrote as a pastor comforting friends who were grieving the deaths of their loved ones. Paul consoled them, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 5:13) Notice that Paul didn't say to his brothers and sisters in the faith, "Don't grieve! The deaths of your loved ones don't matter! Just believe!" Paul said, "So that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

In the same way, Jesus didn't dismiss the sadness and hopelessness of Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus Road. Instead, he listened to them, heard them out, let them share their dreams and hopes and disappointment and hopelessness. Then he offered them a living hope in the breaking of the bread.

In the same way, Jesus doesn't dismiss our sadness and hopelessness and disappointment when our dreams are shattered and our hopes are crushed. Instead, he walks the road with us, through every trial and tribulation. He meets us where we are and he offers us a living hope.

In a little book called *Keywords of Faith*, you find this description of Christian hope: "Christian hope is not simply a confident look to the future; it springs from a conviction that God is consistent with himself, and what he has been is what he will be. Biblical writers can thus speak of 'living hope' in the past tense as well as the future. 'In this hope we were saved' (Romans 8:24). Hope, that is, *Christian hope*, has memory in it as well as expectation. It is a gift from God – we live in hope, because hope lives in us, since Christ 'lives in us.' Hope is not, for Christians, simply a dream about tomorrow. It is a reality that reveals the future in the past and the past in the future."⁴

It has been said that each of us is on our own Emmaus Road walk, between the now and the not yet. Together as a congregation we are walking the Emmaus Road on our Lenten journey. The more we read about Cleopas and his companion walking the Emmaus Road on a Sunday afternoon 2,000 years ago, the more we realize we are walking on the same road through life every day. We are on the road that stretches from the past to a future that remains unknown. Sometimes we feel like we're walking the road alone. Sometimes we walk along sad and confused and maybe even hopeless. But, as Cleopas and his companion discovered that Sunday afternoon, Jesus walks the road with us and gives us the chance to share with him our deepest hopes – “What are you talking about as you walk along?”

Here is a wonderful Call to Worship for an Emmaus Road worship service. As you hear it, think about how on our Emmaus Road walk this Lenten season, our deepest hopes – past, present, and future – can come together as we walk with the Lord.

Easter is not an event that has occurred
it's an adventure that has begun
not a place that we have visited
but a path on which we stand

a story not complete, but unfolding
characters still breathing
stations still teeming
with the promise of new life
not just for you and me
but for all people, in all places

a cosmic crux
a turning point of time

Easter is the season
of wild hope
of dangerous intent
of potent promise

where the future flaps unfurled
in the spirit's breeze

where hopes bubble
with uncorked effervescence

where toes tap
to free-form rhythms

where rainbow hues
splash empty canvas

Today
we continue the journey
we re-enter the story
to explore our questions
to uncover our doubts
to face our nagging need

We walk the path
of two who traveled a dusty road
wrapped in confusion and despair
two who shared the company of a stranger
voicing their pain
airing their fears
and in the listening
heard words of hope and promise
and in the eating
received true bread of life

Today we re-enter the story
with expectation that Christ
will also reveal himself to us
in sights and sounds
in words and symbols
in bread and wine

May the risen Christ
walk with us on this road
be our companion and guide
be our teacher and friend
be our host and servant
and bring his gifts of faith, peace and hope
and deep joy
as always
Amen.⁵

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us, we pray, in every part of our journey, no matter how full of doubt or fear we may be today. Through your Holy Spirit, we pray that you will open our eyes. Help us see you as our risen Lord in all your beauty, and in all your loving power. Amen.

NOTES

¹Masha Gessen, “The Crushing Loss of Hope in Ukraine,” February 23, 2022 at www.newyorker.com.

²Brian E. Konkol, “But We Had Hoped . . .” July 22, 2013 at www.sojo.net.

³John Hare, “Hope for This World,” www.reflections.yale.edu.

⁴Angus T. Stewart and Alan A. S. Reid, *Keywords of Faith: Running the Risk of Heresy!* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), p. 46.

⁵Words by Craig Mitchell (2005) & Iona Community. In “Emmaus Worship Service, Opening of Worship (inspired by the events in Luke 24:13-35) at www.re-worship.blogspot.com.