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Easter 3, Year A
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When Words Aren't Enough

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor and author, said this about the Road to Emmaus. And I'm giving you the PG version:

"Emmaus is wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred... the place we go to throw up our hands and say, let the whole dang thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway."

I think a lot of us know the Road to Emmaus right now. We're tired. We're disappointed. We're disillusioned. Some of us are angry. Some of us have grown numb. Some of us have lost hope. Some of us can't watch the news anymore. Some of us can't stop watching. Either way, we are on that road of despair.

And that is where the gospel meets us today, where Jesus meets us today.

Luke tells us a story about two people on this road to Emmaus, heading away from Jerusalem, away from everything they had hoped for.

In today's lesson, Jesus appears to Cleopas and an unnamed disciple as they make the long walk to Emmaus. One commentator invites us to imagine that we are the unnamed disciple.

These two travelers share with Jesus some of the saddest lines in all of scripture. They say, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

We had hoped.

You can feel the despair. They wanted a messiah like David. A king who would restore the kingdom of Israel, drive out the Roman Empire, return Israel to its former glory.

They wanted the good old days back. But here is what they may have forgotten about the good old days.

Yes, David was a man after God's own heart. But David was also a man who abused his power, took another man's wife, and then had the husband killed in battle to cover up the affair.

The kingdom he built was marked by violence, corruption, and division. The so-called golden age wasn't all that golden.

And yet this is what the disciples wanted to bring back. To be fair, most of us tend to romanticize the past, especially in the face of despair. The current situation is so dire we convince ourselves that the best days are behind us.

I, for one, am convinced we need to bring back the 1990s. The 90s were a time before high-speed internet and smartphones. When kids had free rein over the neighborhood until the sun went down. When you drank out of the hose when you got thirsty. When music was, well, just that, music.

But even that golden age wasn't golden for all. Not everyone's neighborhood was safe to roam. Not every kid had a hose to drink from. And to be honest, some of the music needs to stay in the past.

Who wishes they didn't throw away that Creed CD?

Every generation has its golden age. And every golden age has an unflattering side.

If we aren't careful, we can convince ourselves the kingdom of God is behind us. If we aren't careful, we can let a romanticized past shape what we long for, what we hope to recover.

But the kingdom of God is not anchored in the days of old. God is not bringing back the Garden of Eden. God is doing something new, doing something that can only come from God.

The Book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of the new thing God is doing. This new kingdom is populated by a multitude from every tribe, every tongue, every nation — all of them gathered, in harmony, around the throne of God.

The resurrection of Jesus pulls that future hope into the present moment, giving us permission to live toward that future. This vision gives us reason to work toward that reality no matter how big the obstacles seem. Jesus has risen above them all.

And yet, as extraordinary as that future vision is, it meets us in the most ordinary way. That future hope has a face, and he is walking right beside the travelers on the road to Emmaus. They miss him because he comes in the form of a stranger.

When Jesus meets the travelers, he doesn't introduce himself. He doesn't make any bold declaration. Instead, he makes space for them to come to that conclusion on their own.

Jesus starts with a question. "What are you discussing as you walk along?" Jesus meets them where they are and begins a conversation.

Jesus reminds them of all that the scriptures had said, that the Messiah would undergo suffering and death before rising again. He reminds them that God's salvation moves from

death to resurrection, not backward into a golden age that was never as good as we remembered. Even if it was, God has something better in mind.

Initially, the travelers do not recognize the one whom they have given their lives to over the last three years. That would be too good to be true. Even Jesus himself couldn't convince them of the good news of his resurrection with words alone.

So, I wonder, why do we think our words alone, no matter how right they are, can convince the other that they are misguided?

We've convinced ourselves that the right argument, the right words, the right logic will change someone's mind. But people who are consumed by fear or anger or grief can't hear the truth especially if it comes from someone they don't have a relationship with, from someone they don't trust, from a stranger.

And because I am married to a therapist, I know this phenomenon is called being flooded. When we are flooded, we literally cannot take in new information. It is, in fact, impossible.

And right now, most of us are more flooded than we realize. Not just individually, but collectively. We are consumed with information, with fear, with outrage, with grief. And because our nervous system is overwhelmed, we are unable to see clearly.

It is going to take something more than words to help us see again. We are going to have to find ways to be present to one another, really present, not as strangers, but as people. As neighbors. As those made in the image of God.

I should offer a word of caution here. Sitting down with people who are different than us doesn't require the same sacrifice for all. For some in this room, it is a simple step. For others particularly those who have been harmed, excluded, unseen, it is an act of courage. It can be risky.

And yet, God desires to meet all of us at the table. A table where no one is turned away. And yes, not even them. It was never meant to be a table only among friends but a table where strangers also meet.

The travelers to Emmaus find themselves at just such a table. They don't recognize Jesus until they sit down with him, say prayers, and break bread.

At the table, God opens what has been closed in them. Their flooded hearts become open. They can see again.

Once their eyes are opened, they exclaim, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?"

Their hearts were too overwhelmed to receive the truth Jesus spoke. It wasn't until the table, where they could be fully present with one another and with Jesus that they could hear and see the gospel.

Preaching the gospel is not just about saying the right words. It is about creating the kind of community where the good news of Jesus and his kingdom can be heard, seen, and received. And this kind of community is created when we show up and strive to love others like Jesus loves us.

When we gather for worship, we sit beside people who think differently than we do, who vote differently than we do, who have come to their faith differently than we have. And yet, we pray together. We sing together. We break bread together. In a world that sorts itself into like-minded corners, choosing to gather with people who aren't like us is itself a witness to resurrection life.

Every week some of us go to Avondale to share a meal with our neighbors living on the streets. We go to be present with people the world too often overlooks, people Jesus spent a lot of time with.

When we gather to study, we value better questions over right answers. We believe formation is not about being right. It is about being in relationship with the one who makes us right.

When we gather in prayer, through the daily office, through centering prayer, through whatever practice brings us into stillness and openness, we are doing something radical. In a world that can't keep still or silent, we are reorienting our lives around the life of Christ, the one who helps us slow down and see again.

These are all ways that Jesus is using Ascension to open our hearts to see again. These are all ways where Jesus is meeting us on the road of life.

We keep coming back here to remember how to see. To remember that the best days are ahead. To remember what the future looks like in the present moment so we can find the courage again to live as if that future were now.

The risen Lord is on the road with us and is readily awaiting the invitation to break bread with all of us so that we may see in the other not a stranger but the image of God, a brother or sister in Christ.

The Church is being invited to give the world news worth watching, news worth sharing, news that opens eyes to the ways God is pulling the future hope into the present moment through our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.