

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Easter Sunday
Year C

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Text: Luke 24:13-35

Title: **“The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus—The Shock of God’s Unexpected Choice”**

Our daughter-in-law, Aimee, posted an article on Facebook this week. It was about a relative of hers, an infant who died at 3 1/2 months of age. Josie was her name. She was diagnosed with Noonan’s syndrome shortly after her birth last May. Caused by a genetic defect, Noonan’s can cause multiple difficulties, and in Josie’s case her heart and blood platelets were affected. She also had mal-rotation of the bowel and required a feeding tube. Josie endured nearly 300 medical procedures including two surgeries, and received several blood and platelet transfusions in her 109 days of life.

I remember when Josh and Aimee came back to Michigan last September to attend the funeral. It was incredibly painful for this tight knit family. It was certainly not what the new parents expected or wanted.

Yet, they are hardly unique in that sense because life often does **not** dish out what we want or expect. Sometimes life is downright painful and we are left to deal with whatever it is that caused the pain. Life is a trip during which the unforeseen and unwanted can happen. Ask the people and their families who expected to fly out of the Brussels’ airport last week. When such things happen, where do we turn? How do we keep navigating this God-given trip of life when the unexpected happens?

Well, let’s look at one of the Easter stories for some answers. We have in the Gospel According to Luke, two disciples of Jesus on Easter day taking a 7-mile hike to a town called Emmaus. They start in Jerusalem, the place outside of which Jesus was cruelly nailed to a cross, a favorite form of capital punishment the Romans used for political dissidents and criminals of all types.

As often happens when people hike together, these two have a conversation. It might have been about Judas who some say was trying to force Jesus to take leadership and lead a coup d’état against the Romans and free them all from Roman oppression. But things went terribly wrong if that was Judas’ plan because Jesus didn’t lead the kind of revolt that Judas may have anticipated. He wasn’t that kind of leader. Jesus was not a military man in that sense. Instead,

Jesus chose to allow himself to be crucified. He walked to his death willingly which completely ignores the instinct of self-preservation at all costs. As the prophet Isaiah wrote centuries before: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). Jesus chose an unexpected path and now they and all those who knew Jesus and loved him were left with the shock of it all.

So these two followers are hiking along their 7-mile journey and talking about the whole affair, wondering perhaps what Jesus could have been thinking. Why would he allow himself to be taken when he could have run, head to the wilderness again and hide away until he could organize enough people to lead a movement against the Romans? They are trying to wrap their minds around all of this on their way to Emmaus. They might have been going home as Peter decides to do in the Gospel According to John—back to fishing again. Maybe they are heading back for business or just getting away from the pain of what they witnessed in Jerusalem—running from their grief.

Frederick Buechner, a Lutheran pastor and writer, has interpreted Emmaus as

*the place we go to in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’ ...Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred; that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that [people] ... have had—ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] ... for selfish ends. (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966) 85-86: quoted in *New Interpreters’ Bible, V. IX, p. 482*)*

These two are talking about all of this on their way to their Emmaus, trying to wrap their minds around what had happened when someone approaches them and begins hiking with them. For whatever reason they don’t see that it’s Jesus. They don’t recognize him. And he asks them what they’re talking about. They rehearse the events but the weight of their response falls on four words: “But we had hoped...”

A lot is said in those four words:

We had hoped for a future that clearly isn’t going to happen.

We had a dream about which we had passion and enthusiasm but it didn’t materialize.

We had expectations for a promise that created faith but it proved to be false.

We anticipated a future that is now closed off and irrelevant.

There is a legend that Ernest Hemmingway was challenged to write a short story in six words. The legend goes that he wrote it on a napkin: “For Sale: Baby shoes, never used.”

On this journey through life there are few things more disorienting and life-draining than a dead future. It’s not just the pain experienced by whatever event results in walking our road to Emmaus that hurts, but the hole of all that might have happened but now won’t.

As I was writing this sermon I thought, “But this is Easter! Where is the good news, preacher? I want to hear hope, not hang with these two disciples in their hopelessness! I want to hear about new life not bad death.” But then again, that voice encouraging a move to quickly get to the burning hearts that we know is coming is a reflection of the tendency to run away from the cross-like experiences of life for the promise of resurrection. It can be noticed not just in the church but in our daily lives.

For instance, a friend shares that his sister has died and we sympathize for a few moments before changing the subject. Or someone with whom we work shares the disappointment of not getting a promotion she expected and we are quick to remind her that at least she has a job. Or we see someone who has experienced some kind of terrific loss and we avoid him or her because we just don’t know what to say. We don’t intend to be callous or cold-hearted. It’s just that we aren’t clear about how to handle the darkness of our lives and in the world and so we sometimes try to quickly move on.

Yet, I read somewhere and I think it’s true: “...before there are the burning hearts there are broken ones.”

The gift in this Easter account is that Jesus continues to walk with these two who had hopes. He sticks with them when he could have continued on and left them to their grief. In the midst of experiencing their broken hearts, Jesus continues to walk with them teaching them that it was “...necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Reminding them of prophetic teachings that proclaimed the Messiah would, in fact, suffer and that again from Isaiah:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8)

In Jesus, God makes the unexpected choice to die in order to demonstrate how profound God’s love is: to give God’s own life for another. As Jesus says in the Gospel According to John:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

(John
15:13)

Maybe they heard him say such things in his preaching but didn’t realize he really meant it and would act on it. Maybe they didn’t realize it would result in their own brokenness. The truth is that part of being human is to experience brokenness. What they hear is that while brokenness is real and something we share in common, it is not the end of the human experience. The Risen Christ comes in the midst of that brokenness and walks them through it even when they don’t recognize him until they invite him into their home. He didn’t force them to receive him. Jesus doesn’t force anyone to trust him or follow him. They invite him in—it’s their choice! And as they sit down for dinner, he breaks the bread at their own table. Once again he serves them and then he’s gone. It’s only then that they recognize him. It’s then they remembered that their hearts burned with renewed hope. It’s then that they recognize the future is not dead but is very much alive because he is risen. Death does not carry the kind of power they thought.

The Easter message is that Christ may surprise you by showing up and reminding you that death is not the ultimate power, that suffering is part of being human, but Christ is a constant loving presence beyond all deaths. Even though we, like these two Emmaus hikers, don’t

recognize him, the Risen Christ is present when we are paying attention and open.

Our daughter-in-law's family, the couple whose 3 ½ month old infant died of Noonan's syndrome? Well, they decided to channel their broken hearts in a life-giving way. Because they were so grateful for all the blood transfusions their little girl received, they partnered with the Red Cross to give back some of the life their daughter received by sponsoring blood and plasma drives. They call the drives "Josie Strong". Her mother said that "what she learned from her [daughter] will stay with her always. She calls them 'Josie Perspectives.'"

"Our motto is 'Do something bigger than yourself,'" she said. "Josie taught me there are so many big things in this life to worry about, so it's stupid to worry about the small stuff. ...And be grateful for what you have. One of the things I look back on, that I struggle with, is we didn't know she wasn't going to be here. So appreciate the moments that you have."

Josie's mother also said that they are determined to keep Josie's memory alive.

"We really do feel it was God's plan to have us as her parents, and feel she was destined to be ours," she said. "And neither one of us will let her life go unnoticed."

The Risen Christ is still walking with people to Emmaus, renewing hope, remaining with them—with us—when our hearts are broken and hope is gone, reminding us that death is not the end. Death is not the victor it claims to be.

Maybe you aren't or haven't experienced the burning heart of recognizing the presence of the Risen Christ. Maybe you are on the road to your own Emmaus. Maybe you know the frustration and anger of cancer returned, or the addiction that hasn't been overcome. Maybe you feel the broken heart of a loved one's death or a lover betrayed. Maybe your hopes have been dashed as a child walked away or the job didn't materialize. Maybe you're walking your own road to Emmaus with hopes that have been erased. It's okay to grieve a future once anticipated that may never be.

Yet, as you walk look for Christ where there is saving activity. Maybe you can't see his face but we recognize him by the breaking of bread, by the saving, feeding, active movement of Christ's living Spirit in people near and far. Look for Jesus in the hope of life beyond death, when it looks like the end, when we think it's all said and done, when it looks like you're down for the count, it doesn't mean it's the end of life. In fact, it may just be a new beginning!