

“We Had Hoped He Would Be the One...”
Sermon on Luke 24:13-35 (5/3/15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Today marks the fifth Sunday of the Easter season. I *love* Easter – and I love that it's not just a day, but a 50-day *season* in the church. Sure, all of the Easter merchandise is either gone or moved to clearance sections in our local stores...but, here in the *church*, we're still celebrating.

And our Easter celebrations continue here in the church, despite all the devastating things that happen in our lives, in our nation, and in our world. I mean, if only devastation and despair would take a vacation during the Easter season, right? But they don't.

// //

The week after Easter Sunday back in 2009, my first dog died from an aggressive form of canine lymphoma. She was only three-and-a-half, and I was devastated. Not only was I sad in general about her death, but it also put a sort of damper on Easter. It seems a little strange to say that, I know, but it's true.

See, like I said, I *love* Easter – far more than Christmas, actually. I love the build-up to Easter with its emphasis on Jesus' sacrifice and death on the cross...a devastating build-up that leads to the bright, hopeful glory of the resurrection on Easter Sunday – and then that bright, hopeful glory continues through the 50-day Easter season. I just absolutely love it!

When my dog died the week after Easter in 2009, it sort of ruined Easter for me. I kind of thought, “Come on, God – can't you just let me bask in the beauty of the resurrection for a while before hitting me with something so sad???”

Since 2009, the weeks after Easter have *also* brought a couple of romantic break-ups into my life.

So, I must admit, I had started to wonder if that was going to become some sort of cruel pattern: Easter *Sunday* happens in all its bright, heavenly glory...and then, early in the Easter *season*, I'm brought right back to earth with something devastating in my personal life.

Thankfully, in the midst of the sadness I've experienced the weeks after Easter in recent years, I've also had wonderful people help to take care of me. I've also been reminded that others are struggling, too – in much bigger ways than I ever was or am.

(Not that we should compare our personal sufferings...when tough things happen to us, they are tough, period – regardless of what others may also be going through. But, seeing the struggles of others always helps offer perspective in the midst of my own pain. And if I can then somehow reach out to others who are struggling? Even better.)

Thankfully, this Easter season has not brought with it anything devastating in my *personal* life: my pets are wonderfully alive and my romantic relationship is beautifully in-tact.

I wish I could say the same for our nation and world, however. The news this past week has been awful – and on multiple fronts.

The already-impooverished country of Nepal was ravaged by an earthquake leaving nearly 7,000 dead, twice as many injured, and leaving the nation scrambling for clean water, health care, and wondering how in the world they will rebuild.

Also in the news this past week was our president taking responsibility for the death of two hostages – one American and one Italian – who were killed in a US drone strike earlier this year. Regardless of how any of us may feel about drone strikes, collateral damage like that is tragic.

And, of course, whether online or on TV, we can't escape news of what's happening in Baltimore...and about how what's happening in Baltimore has created earthquake-like shockwaves throughout the country. This past week, my Facebook newsfeed has been filled with people's varying opinions on *that* situation and it's been overwhelming to sort through.

It's been a terrible week in our nation and in the world. Yet, here we are: still celebrating Easter. Call it irony...call it unfortunate coincidence. Call it reality. Call it what you will. The news is awful, but it's still Easter.

// //

Today's Scripture reading from Luke chapter 24 finds us back on Easter Sunday – the *first* Easter Sunday. Some of Jesus' female followers had discovered the empty tomb early that morning and had shared the news of Jesus' resurrection with his disciples.

The disciples hadn't believed the women...and all of them remained fearful and grief-stricken.

Later in the day, the story of today's reading occurred when two of Jesus' other male followers were walking from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus.

While they discussed the events of the week – Jesus' trial, his crucifixion, and his death – the resurrected Christ met them on the road and walked with them. The men didn't recognize him, however, and they chatted with him as though he were a complete stranger.

Jesus asked them why they seemed so upset and they explained about their Lord's tragic death. “By what he did and said, he showed that he was a powerful prophet who pleased God and all the people,” they said. “Then the chief priests and our leaders had him arrested and sentenced to die on a cross. We had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free.”

“We had hoped he would be the one...”

That's these disciples' way of saying, “We had hoped Jesus would make everything right again, that he would fix everything – that everything would be different... everything would be better...everything would be good – *all* the time.” And that just didn't happen.

//

For centuries, Jesus' people – the Jewish people, the people of Israel – had been living under the occupation of one political empire after another...and they were sick of it.

In the midst of their oppression, God had promised them that, one day, a Messiah would come to save them.

Many of Jesus' people were expecting their Messiah to come by military might – they were expecting their salvation would come through a violent overthrow of whatever outside government was occupying their land. They wanted their land to be *their* land, once and for all.

As they understood it, when God sent the Messiah, that Messiah would kick out their occupiers, and control of Israel would return to *them*. But that's not what Jesus had been doing. He had not built a military coalition and he had not made any obvious effort to oust the Roman authorities who were occupying Israel during his lifetime.

Jesus did not look like the kind of Messiah so many of the Jewish people were expecting God to send...yet, he'd healed countless people and he'd managed to draw thousands to hear his teachings and to witness his miracles. Incredible things, yes – but not the things the Messiah was *supposed* to do.

At least...not what anyone *thought* the Messiah was supposed to do.

“We had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free.” That's what those disciples said on that walk to Emmaus the first Easter Sunday.

“We had hoped he would be the one...”

In some way, don't we *all* hope following Jesus means everything will be okay? Don't we all hope following Jesus means everything will be made right in our lives?

“We had hoped Jesus would make everything right again, that he would fix everything – that everything would be different...everything would be better... everything would be good – *all* the time.” Unfortunately, that just isn't how it works. Jesus did not come bearing a magic wand.

Everything is *not* good all the time: in fact, many of us can't even get all that far past Easter Sunday before things fall apart. Eventually, however, if we open our hearts, we will discover Jesus walking along with us – whether or not we recognize him right away.

Like those men so many years ago, we *will* encounter the risen Christ and we *will* find hope in the midst of the struggles we face in this life. That's the promise of Easter. And Jesus invites us to be part of it.

// //

You have perhaps noticed the black-and-white picture that is printed on several 8 1/2 x 11 pieces of paper in each of your pews. Please make sure everyone in your pew has the opportunity to take a look at one of those pieces of paper.



I discovered this image several years ago when a friend posted it on Facebook and I instantly fell in love with it: a hand with the word “HOPE” written on it, reflecting in a car’s driver’s side mirror... the message at the bottom of the image is the familiar “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.” *Hope* is closer than it may appear.

It’s a good reminder any time of the year, but it’s especially poignant in this Easter season...this season of celebrating Christ’s glorious resurrection from the dead.

All may have seemed beautiful and good back on Easter Sunday...but a lot can happen in a few weeks. Heck, a lot can happen in an *afternoon*. Everything can change. Dogs die...relationships fall apart...people are diagnosed with cancer... friends betray you...jobs are lost...earthquakes hit...drone strikes kill unintended victims...and entire cities explode with racial unrest and injustice.

People all over our community, our nation, and our world are desperately crying for mercy and help in various forms – and those cries don’t stop just because we in the church are still holding onto Easter joy.

When life gives you lemons, life does not wait to toss those lemons at you until the most convenient time. Bad things *do* happen during Easter...and it can seem like God has abandoned you – or at least walked away from you for a while.

But, the bad things in life aren’t meant to put a damper on Easter joy: quite the opposite, actually. Instead, the joy of Easter is meant to put a damper on the bad things in life. *Easter* is meant to bring everything else into perspective – the good, the bad, the unjust, and the devastating.

Because with Easter, we are assured that *every* road we take is a road to Emmaus – that everywhere we go, Jesus *will* meet us and will walk alongside us. With Easter, there *is* hope. And that hope is always closer than it may appear.

// //

Jesus’ earliest disciples thought all was lost when he died on the cross that first Good Friday. After that devastation, they could not imagine life looking better, different. Yet those first disciples only had to wait a couple of days before they saw God’s glory shining into their despair.

They only had to wait a short while before they were assured of Christ’s eternal presence with them. For us, for our communities, for our nation, and for the world the wait is longer sometimes. Much longer.

But, it *is* still Easter. And, because it’s Easter, we are reminded that hope is so often closer than it may appear – that Jesus Christ himself is closer than he may appear.

//

As Jesus' followers today, we are his body on earth – his hands and feet, called to extend his mercy and love to a world that's hurting. When we extend that mercy and love, we become tangible signs of Easter hope.

It's a donation to the United Methodist Committee on Relief as they respond in Nepal. It's a prayer for peace in the Middle East. It's water and kindness to both protesters *and* police in Baltimore. It's strangers and friends who gather to bring food and to help do the work necessary to make a home wheelchair-accessible. It's the shoulder offered when we need to cry. And it's the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

All these and more are signs of Easter glory breaking-into our devastation and despair. They are signs that hope is *always* closer than it may appear. That is the good news of Easter. And we *must* continue to celebrate it. Thanks be to God.