

McCabe United Methodist Church

Footprints Series, Part 2

“The Bread”

Sermon on Luke 24:13-35 (May 6 & 7, 2017)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. 'Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. "But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me.'

The Lord replied, 'My precious, precious child. I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'¹

This message today marks the second and final message in a two-part series based on the story we just heard read from chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel – the story of Jesus meeting two of his earliest disciples on their seven-mile journey to the town of Emmaus.

That seven-mile journey happened in the afternoon of the first Easter day 2,000 years ago – a day when Jesus' first disciples were not yet all confident in the reality of his resurrection from the dead. This story from Luke 24 reminds me of the famous poem I just read, the poem “Footprints in the Sand.”

¹ “Footprints in the Sand.” Author contested <http://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/books/2004/04/whose-footprints-is-it.aspx?>

Like the man in the poem, on that first Easter day 2,000 years ago, Jesus' disciples were fearful and afraid... they were unsure of God's continuing presence with them... they were unsure that there really *was* an extra set of footprints walking alongside them on their journey.

Their hopes had been dashed and everything seemed uncertain.

These past few weeks, as I prepared for this series on the Emmaus story in Luke 24, I couldn't help but think about the "Footprints in the Sand" poem. But, as I thought about *that* poem, I encountered *another* piece of writing – a very different piece of writing – that seemed also to speak to the message of this powerful passage of Scripture.

This other piece of writing I encountered that seemed connected to the theme of the Emmaus story was – as legend has it – written by famed American fiction writer Ernest Hemingway.

As legend has it, decades ago, Hemingway once won a bet among fellow writers that he could create an entire short story with six words. Though his buddies doubted he could do it, *as legend has it*, he did it; a short story in six words. *These* six words:

*"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."*²

One, two, three, four, five, six: a powerful, six-word story.

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

These six words hang in the air like a heavy fog, don't they? They comprise a story that aches with grief: grief over a child who died in the womb... or grief over a child who didn't live long enough to fill the shoes – the grief of a parent who eagerly awaited the day their child would tromp about with those very shoes gracing their sweet, little feet.

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

² <http://www.openculture.com/2015/03/the-urban-legend-of-ernest-hemingways-six-word-story.html>

This six-word story is the story of a parent's grief – a parent whose hopes were dashed.

It might be a story that belongs to some of you in this room – or, it might be the story of someone you know and love. Of course, it's possible *your* version of the story might be slightly tweaked:

- “For sale: baby shoes, infertile parents.”
- “For sale: baby shoes, adoption failed.”

Each of these six-word stories is a story of dashed hope... and, if you've lived a decade or more on this earth, it's very likely you have your *own* story of dashed hope.

Your six-word story of dashed hope might be something more like:

- “Spouse cheated. Now what? Please help.”
- “Tried college. Flunked-out. What's next?”
- “Lost my dream job. Clueless now.”
- “Fell off the wagon. Family left.”
- “Plans fell apart. Moved back home.”

Or, perhaps your six-word story of dashed hope is:

- “Dreamed of marriage, motherhood: still single.”

In my life, and in my nearly decade-and-a-half of full-time pastoral ministry, I've encountered *all* of these stories of dashed hopes – all of these stories... and more.

And, though the circumstances were very, very different than any of those mentioned in these “six-word stories”... the theme of *dashed hopes* is the setting for today's reading from Luke chapter 24.

In fact, it's more than six words, but the disciples on the road to Emmaus told *their* story of dashed hope when they said, “We had hoped [Jesus] would be the one to set Israel free.”

They didn't know it when they shared these words, but they were walking *with* the resurrected Jesus – their Savior and Lord, their Messiah, the one they'd put their hopes in, the one who had been executed by Rome three days before, the one who had been securely buried in a rock-hewn tomb.

They were walking with the very one in whom they'd put their hopes... he was *alive*, walking with them that first Easter day... he was hearing their tale of dashed hope... and they had no idea it was him.

See, Jesus' earliest disciples had hoped he would be the kind of Messiah they'd been expecting God to send for centuries.

Jesus' people – the Israelites, the Jewish people – were not a large group of people, comparatively. Over the course of their history, they and their land had been overtaken by one powerful political empire after another: the Babylonians, the Assyrians... and, at the time of Jesus, it was the Romans.

God had promised a Messiah would come one day to save the Israelites from these outside oppressors – God had promised that, someday, a Messiah would come to *set them free* from the power of these foreign governments and militaries.

Jesus' earliest disciples thought and hoped *he* was that one – the one who would save them from the power of Rome... the Roman Empire that was convinced *they* were *all-powerful* and could never be defeated.

Though it didn't happen the way Jesus' earliest followers were expecting it to happen, in Jesus, they *were* set free... because, while we know death is death, Rome could not keep Jesus in the grave. The reality of Jesus' resurrection *is* what makes him Messiah, the Lord of all creation. And this resurrection reality is what gives us hope in all things. Yet...

Yet, here's the problem for us humans: we may know and understand this resurrection reality *intellectually* – we may “get it” in our minds – but, when our hopes get dashed, it can be painfully difficult to know and understand resurrection reality *in our hearts*. Do you know what I mean when I say that?

Sometimes the furthest distance between any two points is the distance between our head and our heart.

We can say, in our heads, as many times as we want to, that our hope is in Jesus because God raised him from the dead and that means there *really is* hope in all things. We can say that in our heads and completely fail to trust it in our hearts. And that is not necessarily our fault.

I mean... remember those six-word stories of dashed hopes? Stories of infant loss, infertility, infidelity, confusion about the future, addictions... stories of plans that fall spectacularly apart; remember those six-word stories? There is no diminishing how difficult those stories are when they are *our* stories.

When those stories of dashed hopes are *our* stories, the distance between our head and our heart can seem insurmountable... and we can find it ever more difficult to believe the truth that, in the resurrection of Jesus there is hope in all things. *All. Things.*

The good news is that God knows this about us. God knows we struggle to truly understand the good news of Jesus' resurrection. God knows that painful life circumstances challenge our ability to trust that God *is* working for good in all things – even in the mess of our lives.

God knows this about us... and, so, every once in a while, God becomes present to us in a mysterious way, simply to remind us we are not alone... simply to remind us there *is* good in our lives and in our world. Even when our hopes are dashed.

If you've caught our newsletter and bulletin announcements lately about the sermon series we'll be starting in mid-June – our summer “Ghost Stories” series – if you've read those announcements, these are the stories we'd love to hear from *you*: *your* stories of God appearing to *you* in a powerfully mysterious way, offering help or guidance or assurance... at a time when you were in desperate need.

Those are *your* stories of an extra set of footprints in the sand... *your* stories of God showing up in the midst of dashed hopes... those are *your* Emmaus stories. If you have a story like that, Pastor Mark and I would be honored to hear it... and we'd love for you to consider telling it so it can be shared sometime this summer.

Again... in today's story, Jesus appeared to two of his first disciples as another set of footprints on their journey, at a critically important time.

But, while their hearts were warmed as they talked with Jesus on the road, they did not realize it was him until they were at table, preparing to eat a meal together.

At that holy table, Jesus took the bread. He blessed the bread... and then he broke the bread. In that very moment, the two disciples finally understood it had been Jesus with them the whole time.

So... as we prepare to celebrate Holy Communion, and as we soon take the bread and cup, I pray you know – without a doubt – that this bread and these cups are the tangible, mysterious presence of our Lord and Savior: signs of hope and new life, no matter your story. Amen.