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Luke 24:13-35

FILLED

When we think of Easter and the season of Eastertide, those weeks following Easter, we usually think of a season of great joy. But the truth is, that first Easter day begins with profound disappointment. That's the emotion we hear at the beginning of the Luke passage. Two of Jesus' followers are traveling from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. They are traveling sometime on that Sunday, the same day we now call Easter. And these two followers of Jesus are weighed down with grief and profound disappointment in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. As they walk along, they are discussing the horrible events that just occurred in Jerusalem when they are joined by Jesus. But they don't yet know it is Jesus. They think it's some stranger. Jesus asks what they are talking about and so they tell him. They tell him about Jesus, about how he was a prophet, how he did mighty deeds of God, and how Jesus was arrested, then crucified. And then these two followers of Jesus add, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

But *we had hoped*. Those three little words tell a giant story, don't they? There is so much lying behind those three words: We had hoped. So much anticipation. So much heartbreak. We had hoped.

I bet in these days of Covid-19 and social lockdown that you have a "we had hoped" story of your own--probably more than one--a story about a loss, or a disappointment, or a sorrow.

We had hoped to see her walk across the stage and receive her diploma.

We had hoped that this would be the year when our business would finally turn a profit.

We had hoped that this quarantine would end in two weeks.

We had hoped to celebrate Easter together.

We had hoped to start college, get a job, study abroad, get married.

We had hoped to be at our father's bedside when he died.

Where once we had been filled with hopeful expectations, those three words now speak of a drastically different story--of heartbreak, of disappointment, of loss. And in place of our hope, there is an emptiness, as empty as this sanctuary right now.

That's how those followers of Jesus were feeling as they journeyed to Emmaus. They felt the profound emptiness after hope has evaporated and there is nothing left. The hope these followers had in Jesus had been growing over time. Notice the followers didn't say, "We *hoped* Jesus was the one to redeem Israel," as though it had been a one-time thought. Instead they said, "we *had* hoped," indicating that this hope had been a growing, developing feeling. It grew stronger and stronger over time, filling them up as they witnessed Jesus heal the sick, as they saw him feed the hungry, as listened to his teachings about God, as he spoke about God's love for them, and as that love made these simple, poor folks feel empowered. Gradually this hope that he was the one to redeem Israel filled them up. They became encouraged that even though they were poor, their lives mattered, their lives counted. They became hopeful that life could be something more than the suffering and the heartbreak and the cruelty they knew almost daily. They became confident in a better future.

But now this hope came to a crashing end. The events of the past days in Jerusalem ended their evolving hope. *We had hoped* speaks of a future that is *not* to be, of a hope that is *not* to be realized. And it leaves behind a gaping hole of what could have been. Easter begins with broken hearts and broken dreams and a great gaping emptiness.

Until . . . until Jesus sits down at the table with these two travelers and he breaks the bread. And then their eyes were opened and they realized who he was. This was no stranger who was with them but rather it was Jesus *himself*. The risen Christ was present with them! And even after he vanishes from their sight, the *presence* of the risen Christ that they have experienced fills them with a lasting joy and hope. They were filled with a new awareness: an awareness in the power of God to overcome darkness with light; an awareness of God's great and amazing love for us; an awareness that the present and the future are *not* empty but are full--full of God. For those early disciples, the present and the future would indeed offer many hardships and challenges. But the sacred, mysterious, amazing presence of the risen Christ had touched their lives and filled their emptiness with a new kind of hope and a new kind of life. The *presence* of the risen Christ made all the difference.

A lot of us are dealing with a profound sense of emptiness right now. We are experiencing all kinds of losses. So many of our hopes and dreams have been lost. Look at all these empty pews, testifying to the hard reality that we cannot be physically present with one another right now.

But nothing can stop the presence of the risen Christ. These pews might be empty but the risen Christ can still fill *us* up! The sacred God of life is indeed present with you today! And that love fills our emptiness. The presence of the risen Christ shows us that God's light is more powerful than all the world's darkness. The presence of the risen Christ tells you that no matter what you have done or what is going on in your life right now, you matter to God. The presence of the risen Christ tells you that the God loves you and empowers you to live out that same love for others. In us, in you, in me, other people can know the presence of the risen Christ's love and can find their emptiness filled with hope.

Chef Mario Santiago owns the May Street Cafe in Chicago. His cafe was doing a booming business in both the restaurant and through their catering business. When the coronavirus hit, everything came to an abrupt halt. Chef Santiago had to lay off 30 of his employees--all of whom he described as loyal workers. But then Chef Santiago learned about a local grade school also facing a crisis. The parents of the school children have lost their jobs and are struggling to feed their children. So, Chef Santiago has started cooking meals twice a week for these families. And his food is filling more than people's stomachs. One parent said that the meals he brings home from Santiago's kitchen is giving them hope, that Chef Santiago is "teaching us that there's hope out there, that there's people who care."

This is the same kind of hope some of you have offered to the Covid-19 Relief fund we have started here at church to help struggling families and individuals through their financial hardship. It is the same kind of hope we offer when we call one another on the phone to check in on one another. It is the same kind of hope we offer when neighbors shop for neighbors. It is the same kind of hope we offer when people celebrate loved ones birthdays over Zoom. Easter takes emptiness and fills it with a presence--the presence of the risen Christ.

These pews may be empty but the Christian Church is *not* empty. For Christ is risen and fills us and our world with the presence of his love.