

Eyes Open

1 Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24: 13-35

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1 Peter 1: 17-23

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

Luke 24: 13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the

eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Cleopas and his companion, followers of Jesus, are grieving, confused and overwhelmed as they walk the journey home to their village of Emmaus. In Jerusalem at the time of Passover, they have borne firsthand or secondhand witness to all the events of Holy Week. The long distance walk home gives them not only the necessary time to contemplate and process Jesus’ traumatic death and the mystery of the women who this morning saw the empty tomb and heard the angel’s grand news that Jesus was indeed alive, although no one has seen him. They are despondent and fearful as to what will happen next as all the hopes and expectations for redemption they had in Jesus as the savior of Israel have disappeared, just as his body has disappeared.

The seven mile walk also surprisingly gives them time to meet up with a stranger as ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him.’ These two followers have spent time over the past three years in living, breathing, close proximity to Jesus, someone they know, love and admire, yet now they do not, cannot, recognize him.

There is a BBC documentary which seeks to explain the circumstances behind just how and why the disciples, the followers, did not recognize Jesus after the resurrection. Numerous scientists, psychiatrists and doctors came together to try and shed light on the phenomenon. Some said that they thought Jesus cloaked himself in a way that alien space ships do in Star Trek so that his friends wouldn’t see who he was. Some also believed that as he was divine he shifted his physical perspective so that his features became distorted- almost pixelated. The psychiatrists on the other hand looked at the phenomenon in a totally human way, they didn’t try to understand how Jesus had fooled his friends into not seeing him, they looked at what psychological reason there was to the disciples not recognizing Jesus. It all came down to fear, absolute fear, although in the story we don’t necessarily sense fear in Cleopas and his friend, but there must have been some degree of fear in their hearts as they walked and talked as they headed towards the sanctuary of Emmaus. Fear of enduring the same fate and death that Jesus suffered can mean that the fear in their hearts has closed their eyes. Were they so grieved by their experience and so sure that Jesus was gone that they simply couldn’t imagine his presence with them? Did Jesus look different after the resurrection? Was his face transformed?

I believe that in their grief and certainty that Jesus had died, their vision was clouded. They could not see what, who, they did not expect to see, even with the scriptural map the stranger so carefully laid out for them. Truth was lost in a haze of sorrow, fear and disbelief. It would take Jesus breaking bread with them for their eyes to be open and their hearts to burn within them.

Cleopas had spoken the lamenting words, ‘but we had hoped,’ as all of their expectations were shattered, as their hopes died when Jesus died. They did not see a future so they did not, could not, see Jesus.

On this day after Earth Day, we too can have a fear of the future, have shattered expectations and hope that is dimmed--perhaps even dying-- as it has been a been more than 50 years since the first Earth Day was created to recognize and address the impact of 150 years of industrial development.¹ We cannot always see hope when the greenhouse gases are now at an all-time high, when the Antarctic ice sheet decline continues to worsen, when temperatures rise

and are causing more and more destructive storms, and as we remain addicted to oil. Our vision of hope can be clouded over when bulldozers and fires are destroying tropical forests, and when hydraulic fracking emphasizes greed over creation. Our eyes can be kept from recognizing hope when animal extinctions continue and the at-risk list grows, and as plastic pollution endangers us all.

How can we see hope again? How can we have our hope renewed and strengthened, have our eyes opened to recognize the hope found in Jesus Christ? How can we hold fast to the knowledge that ‘through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God?’

We are Easter people, a people of the resurrection, so we are to be people of hope even in the most trying of times. It is not a stranger in our midst, but Jesus Christ who walks alongside us, who causes our hearts to burn within us.

In that meeting with Jesus, Cleopas and the other disciple turned around and headed back the right way, back on the right road, back to life. Hope was restored, hearts were burning in the breaking of the bread. Many people need to have their hope restored. Some of us might need to be turned around in our thinking, some might need to ask for strength in the waiting, and many likely need to find their hope again.ⁱⁱ

Even in the midst of the work yet to be done for climate justice, we find hope and encouragement in what the first 50 years of Earth Day has done for the good of the planet, the good of humanity. The hole in the ozone is healing, our rivers are not filthy or on fire, the bald eagle is no longer an endangered species, DDT no longer exists, renewable energy is finally serious business and we have the Environmental Protection Agency as a federal watchdog whose mission it is to protect human and environmental health.

Today we celebrated Kinsley’s baptism and heard the words of baptismal promises that were spoken for her, and had once been spoken for us. We reclaim and renew those words, those promises, in our own lives each and every time we honor and bear witness to the baptism of another beloved child of God. Our promises to by the grace of God be Christ’s disciple, to follow in the ways of the Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ and to further Christ’s mission in the world, forever affirm for us not only the love of this covenantal relationship, but that we forever have hope in the future of God’s creation.

Remembering our baptismal vows, the forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the great love and long reach of God for each of us seems to me a place where we can recover our hope.

It was in a sacramental act that Cleopas and his companion had their hearts burning within them. May our hearts be burning within us with hope for all of God’s creation as we too meet Jesus along the way. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/earth-day-history.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://theirreverentreverend.com/2020/sermons/hope-on-the-road-to-emmaus/>