Invitation to the Table

Grace, as best I can describe it, is the unearned love of God that meets us wherever we are but loves us too much to leave us there. Paul Young captured this reality in his novel, *The Shack,* when Mack asked Jesus, "Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?" Jesus smiled and replied, "Not at all … Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."[1]

The Risen Christ found two men on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday. He listened to their troubled account, including one of the saddest phrases in the Bible, "We had hoped…" Everything they had believed about who Jesus was, all they had imagined about the future, every hope of the Kingdom of God coming among them were laid to rest in the lifeless, bloody body in Joseph's tomb. They were even more troubled when they peered into the tomb and found nothing there. "But we had hoped…"

During WWII, Harry Emerson Fosdick described a similar sense of loss when he asked, "Who today escapes the problem of wanting hope, but on every side seeing our optimism proved illusion and the oasis we dreamed of only mirages?"[2]

But Fosdick dared to push ahead: "Who are we, with our history and traditions, to lose heart about a better world order, and like hermit crabs crawl back into the outgrown shells of obsolete ancestral social systems and international policies?"[3]

And so, feeding off the courage of Fosdick (whose optimism, BTW, turned out to be justified—at least for a couple of generations) my question today is this: is, "We had hoped…" the best we can do?

I find no strategy, no divine plan in all this; but what I do find in Fosdick's testimony is that resurrection life is a conviction that God's last word has not been spoken on any subject, and what I find in the Emmaus story is that in recognizing the risen Lord we experience empowerment to enact all "we had hoped."

The conclusion of the Emmaus story is that the risen Christ is made known in the breaking of bread.

Our Communion Hymn is #398, "Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread."

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[1] Young, Paul, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown, 2007) p. 182
[2] *Good to Be Alive*, page 116.
[3] Ibid., page 120.

Pastoral Prayer

Creating, redeeming, sustaining God, father of our Lord Jesus, we're looking for some hope. The world is in chaos! We need some hopeful indication that the future will be brighter than we fear. We wonder about tomorrow. Is there any hope?

Forgive us when we embrace false hope, when we put our hope in the wrong people, in false projects and false prophets.

Come to us in our worship today and speak words of hope to us. Open our eyes to see that you have not spoken your last word—on any subject. You have not abandoned the intentions and purposes you expressed in creating humans in your image, in engaging in covenant relationships with us and confirming your intentions through prophetic witness. In the Word that became flesh we acknowledge your call upon each of us to join in partnership with you in your work of peace and unity in all your creation.

Give us words to say, work that is meaningful and productive, and hope in the one you raised from the dead. Amen.

LUKE 24:13-21 (NRSVUE) *Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,* [14]*and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.* [15]*While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,* [16]*but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.* [17]*And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.* [18]*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?"* [19]*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,* [20]*and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.* [21]*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.* [22]*Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,* [23]*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.* [24]*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."* [25]*Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!* [26]*Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"* [27]*Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.* [28]*As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.* [29]*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.* [30]*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.* [31]*Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.* [32]*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?"* [33]*That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.* [34]*They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"* [35]*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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The Word of God for the people of God!

Such a fascinating story, even without its theological implications. It is unique to Luke and yet is congruent with the other Gospels' understanding of resurrection.

Resurrection is not the same as immortality. Many people both in the ancient world and today believe in immortality but not resurrection. Immortality is about human nature, that there's something within us that doesn't die. Resurrection is about an act of God; we don't have immortal souls; we die and are powerless unless God acts to grant new life. Jesus shared our humanity. The Word became flesh. He died, and he didn't raise himself. God raised him. Christian hope is in resurrection, not in immortality; it is hope in God, not in ourselves.[4]

Luke's Gospel offers a well-developed, 2nd generation understanding of Jesus'

[4] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 101). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

life, death, and resurrection, and it also offers us insight into the nature of divine inspiration. Inspiration is rarely a sudden flash of unexplained insight like Paul's experience on the road to Damascus; and it's virtually never word-for-word dictation from God. Limited as we are by the clay of which we are made, we humans are seldom capable of that level of comprehension. Sometimes it takes hours, years, and sometimes we get it wrong. And, sometimes divine inspiration comes to a community, over time, rather than through one person, all at once.

That's why there are apparent contradictions, especially in the earlier Hebrew Scriptures. Inspiration is progressive on humanity's part. And God has amazing patience and persistent grace. And once in a while some individual or some community gets it. And God smiles and says, "Hold my communion cup! Watch this!"

And when the time was right, "the Word became flesh:" the ultimate revelation! Now we know what God is like, how God interacts with us, and how God wants us to interact with each other—all that plus eternal life, however you interpret that.

Sometimes, just when I think we're about to get it, another bomb is dropped, another woman bleeds to death because some inhumane law won't allow her to receive medical treatment, another insurance claim is denied and cancer claims another life, another aging widow must choose between medication and groceries.

In today's reading Luke describes one experience within that process of divine inspiration. Two men experience something unexpected and unexplainable, even though it's been being set up for three years. And they get it. The story centers on a conversation during a walk to Emmaus. They're discussing the events of the weekend, trying to make sense of it all, and they're joined by Jesus. But Luke says, "***their eyes were kept from recognizing him.***" The passive voice points to God as the actor, and later we will read that their eyes were opened.

But, on the road, Jesus joins them with: "Hey, guys, what's happening?"

Their incredulous response is, "Are you the only one who doesn't know?" And they recite the events of the weekend—the crucifixion of this prophet, "mighty in word and deed," the discovery of the empty tomb, "…but we had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free."

Jesus' response is kind of put-downish—he calls them foolish and slow; but then he explains things to them.

Maybe you don't have these kinds of conversations. I can't seem to avoid them—even if I wanted to avoid them. I do enjoy them if they remain respectful and honest. They energize me. But, sadly, those conversations rarely remain respectful. Sadly, rather than an opportunity for mutual understanding and edification—part of the process of divine inspiration—they too often turn contentious and become an argument to win or lose.

Such conversations often move immediately toward defending God or the Bible because so many people's faith is rigid and brittle and can't be questioned—a faith that's not about Jesus but about whether we're right. What happens when our faith is questioned? Are we able to distinguish the truth and reality about Jesus without confusing him with our expectations of him? "…but we had expected him to be the one to set Israel free." What happens when brittle faith is shattered?

One of the major disconnects within the Christian community is that some see Jesus as savior but forget that he is lord; faith is distilled to the content of what we believe, to the neglect of following the one who is the subject of those beliefs. The men in today's text say he was a prophet mighty in word and deed. Too often "deed" gets swept under the rug.

Word without deed makes for incomplete faith. Belief without application makes for empty religion. Claiming Jesus as savior without following him as lord risks hypocrisy—you know: loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, washing each other's feet...

Jesus talked the talk and then he walked the walk, this time with two men on the road to Emmaus. Would you like to have followed along and eavesdropped on their conversation? Wouldn't you like for Jesus to walk with you?

Jesus doesn't come to us only "in the garden when we're alone;" he doesn't meet us only at the altar. He meets us on the road, on the seven-mile stretch from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and on ***our*** daily journeys to work or to Kroger. Jesus also comes to us at the table, here in our sanctuary, and in ***our*** house, at our dinner table. We can walk anywhere and find Jesus there.

Bruce Epperly says "The Emmaus story is about embodied movement. Resurrection moved the cells as well as the soul of Jesus, and of his followers."

They went from the tomb and the upper room out into the world, not always knowing where they were going, but trusting Jesus to walk with them. Wendell Berry notes resurrection still gets us out of our comfort zones and calls us to the open road, spiritually, ethically, and sometimes physically.

Movement is essential spiritually as well as physically, even though we move a bit more carefully these days. Practicing resurrection, says Berry, challenges us to take the road less traveled and go against the grain of our social order.

Confused, weary, and grief stricken, two men walking to Emmaus reach out to a stranger and invite him to supper. We don't know the menu, we just know their eyes were opened and they recognized him when he broke bread. In "Jesus Christ, Superstar," at the last supper he said, "If you would just remember me when you eat and drink." Maybe we have to remember before our eyes are opened.

Walking and eating led to revelation, and then when Jesus was gone, leaving

them with warmed hearts, they were so energized that they walked seven miles back to Jerusalem to share their good news that Jesus is risen and on the road.

And after breaking the bread, Jesus was gone. Their eyes were opened, so maybe he needed to keep moving. God is not static, imprisoned in yesterday's revelations, which tend to get carved in stone and stagnate in the church's doctrines and scriptures. But in Jesus we see God alive and on the move, doing new things and sharing new insights with pilgrims on the journey. We can experience Christ alive and on the move as they did: in the least expected places—maybe at the dinner table tonight.

Pray with me.