

NOW WHAT? Luke 24:13-35 (Easter 5A)

Rev. Melissa Hatfield

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/now-what/

In the roaring 1920s, a group of writers gathered for a drink in a hotel lobby. Among them was the famed author Ernest Hemingway. As good pals sometimes do, Hemingway placed a friendly wager on the table. The bet? He could write a story with a complete narrative in just six words. To his friends, it sounded like Hemingway had had one too many, so they eagerly accepted the bet and put their money down. Hemingway jotted a few words on a napkin and passed the napkin around the table. It said, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." The friends handed over their money, for no one could deny it was a complete story.

Now, this tale is the tale of legends. And most likely, it never happened, even though the internet says it did. But that has not stopped a movement of articles, books, and online communities from inspiring people to write six-word stories or memoirs about their lives.

Here are a few examples:

- I still make coffee for two.
- I have time to fix this.
- Old too soon. Smart too late.
- And suddenly, we were strangers again.

A lot can be said in six words. Today's scripture reading is clearly not a six-word story, but there is a powerful, four-word story told along the walk to Emmaus.

BUT WE HAD HOPED. (v21a)

A month ago, on Easter Sunday, we gathered throughout the US to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We sang confidentially, and perhaps with too much familiarity, that the grave could not hold him, and because he lives, we can face tomorrow. Now, pass the ham, find the eggs, and let's take a nap.

But the original Easter Sunday was another story. It started dark and remained dark for most of the day for many of Jesus's closest followers. At First Baptist on Easter Sunday, we listened to Mary Magdalene's powerful story of encountering the Risen Christ in the garden outside the tomb. Afterward, she ran to tell the other disciples, as Jesus told her to do, that Jesus was alive. But some did not believe her. They could not believe such a grand tale.

Later that same day, after hearing but not believing the reports from the women, two of Jesus's close followers left Jerusalem and headed to the town of Emmaus, seven miles away. As Professor Robert Hoch wrote, "Some walks are longer than others — not because of the miles but because of the burdens carried. It was a seven-mile walk, a walk you would notice in your body. But the real path they were walking was vastly longer and more difficult — it was the walk of hopes in shambles. It was the walk taken through the valley of disillusionment."ⁱⁱ

The week in Jerusalem had started with such high hopes. Jesus entered the city to cheers and a royal parade, but by week's end, Jesus would be dead after a brutal and humiliating crucifixion.

These two followers waited three days after that horrible Friday, trusting Jesus's prophecy about the resurrection on the third day. And yet, nothing. No Jesus. Yes, the women had said they'd seen Jesus alive at the tomb, but when some men went to check it out, there was nothing. No Jesus.

Discouraged and defeated, these two, known only as Cleopas and a companion, who very well may have been his wife, Mary, packed up their bags and left.

But we had hoped.

You've been here before. We've all been here. Each of you could tell me a story you had hoped would not happen.

...But we had hoped the cancer would heal.

...But we had hoped the marriage or relationship would last.

... But we had hoped to get into this school, receive this scholarship, or earn this recognition.

...But we had hoped the promotion would come.

...But we had hoped the legislation would pass or not pass.

...But we had hoped the children would thrive and be safe.

...But we had hoped. But we had hoped.

With this four-word story, we learn how the disciples felt immediately after the death of Jesus. With this four-word story, we hear our own stories of disappointment when things don't go as planned or hoped.

But we had hoped. Now what?

Jerusalem was full of memories and dead dreams. Around every corner was a painful reminder of something they wanted to forget, and the city stank with disappointment, death, and even danger. So, they left for Emmaus. That's what we do when things don't go our way. We escape, and we move on to whatever helps us forget we had hopes that were not met.

As author Frederick Buechner asked in his classic sermon on this text, where is your "Emmaus?"ⁱⁱⁱ We all have one, a place we go to get away from our failed dreams, broken relationships, dashed hopes, and derailed futures. Maybe it's Netflix, Apple TV, or some other streaming service that has the nerve to ask us after four hours if we're still watching. Perhaps it's a bar where the booze flows or the candy aisle where the sugar numbs the realities of life. Maybe it's that little smartphone in your hand, the gaming system in your room, or the online shopping cart or porn site that serves as an escape. Perhaps it's the endless pursuit of ... you name it. Fame. Recognition. Pleasure. Money. Love. Whatever helps us ignore our disappointed hopes. That's our Emmaus. That's where we head when we're discouraged, and we don't know what to do next.

As the two walked and talked, they were focused on the disappointment, the confusion, the letdown of their expectations, their pain, and their grief. But then Jesus comes alongside them and walks with them.

Luke's narrative tells us they were kept from recognizing Jesus. We don't know how or why. Were they so grieved and sure that Jesus was gone that they couldn't see him? Did Jesus look different after the resurrection? Was his face transformed on purpose so they could not recognize him? Was Jesus wearing a mask, a bucket hat, and some cool shades to be incognito? We don't know.

What we know is that while they could not see Jesus, Jesus saw them and their pain. As they walked, Jesus asked questions he already knew the answer to because, as usual, Jesus's questions weren't for his sake but for ours. The questions invited them to name their pain, to tell him their story.

"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 in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" (v.17-19)

The two proceed to tell Jesus about what happened to Jesus and then say these words, "But we had hoped." But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel, to set us free from Rome. But he died. And now it is the third day, and nothing. And the women said they saw him alive but nothing. So, there you go. That's what we're discussing as we wonder now what? We had hoped. We'd given up everything for him, but now we don't know what to do next.

The two disciples are us. They were people of hope, but something happened, and they aren't sure now. Everything seems fragile, and they feel vulnerable and perhaps abandoned by Jesus. They don't realize Jesus is with them, perhaps because their eyes and hearts are focused on the situation rather than the Savior.

But even when they don't see Jesus, Jesus sees them. On the road, after they pour out their pain, Jesus explains it all to them again, his message of hope and the new Kingdom he announced. He offers a new way of looking at all that happened, reframes it, and gives it new meaning.

As they arrived at Emmaus, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on, but they urged him to stay, practically forcing or twisting his arm, according to the Greek. They knew it was not safe for him to travel alone at night. And perhaps, they were eager to hear more of what he said. So, they insisted he stay. And he did. Jesus doesn't force himself into our lives, but he stands ready and hopeful for the invitation.

Jesus went to the table, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And v. 31 says, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight." For them, it was in caring for the stranger, providing hospitality and a shared meal that they could finally see and experience Jesus.

After this, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" It was night, they'd just walked seven miles, but they left immediately and returned to Jerusalem, the place of dashed hopes, found the disciples, learned the Risen Jesus had shown himself to Peter, and told their own story of seeing Jesus, too. Their four-word story changed from "But we had hoped." to "But we have hope!"

Some of us are walking the road today, carrying burdens and disappointment. Something or someone you had placed your hope in didn't pan out as you thought, and you're wondering, "Now what?" Some of us are walking toward whatever and whoever helps us ignore our pain and letdowns, and it is leading us further away from the abundant life God dreams for us and impacting those around us that we love and care about.

Friends, wherever you are, hope finds you there. Whether you recognize him or not, believe in him or not, Jesus sees you and walks with you. Hope finds us on the road, weighed down by burdens, wounded by where we've been, unsure of where we're going. Jesus asks us to name our disappointment and reminds us through Scripture and community of his hope. Jesus sets the table and breaks body and bread for us, pours blood and wine for us. Jesus changes our four-word story from, "But we had hoped" to "But we have hope!"

And as people of hope who have encountered the Risen Christ, we are invited to do the same for one another. We find people on the road and walk with them. We invite them to name and share their stories of pain and discouragement. We open the Scriptures so that they can know the love and hope of Christ for them. We set the table so they might be nourished along with us by Christ. We invite them to be part of a community of Jesus-followers like this one that has stories of our journeys on the road and how Jesus changes our stories. We share like those three young men who entered the baptismal waters this morning and shared their stories of how Jesus, this church, and their families met them, walked with them, opened the scriptures, and shared in community with them. And we all go out together to join God in redeeming the world by sharing how Jesus changed our stories from "but we had hoped " to "but we have hope."

I won't make a friendly wager with you this morning, but I will ask you a question: What will be your four-word memoir at the end of your earthly journey? Will it be a story of walking with your eyes and heart focused on defeated dreams and shattered hopes, a story of losing yourself in the things of this world that will continue to steal hope? Or will your story be that Jesus met you on the road, and you invited him to stay, and he transformed your despair into resurrection hope? What will your four-word memoir be? But we had hoped ... or but we HAVE hope. Amen.

God, who journeys with us, who see us and meets us, we give thanks for the story of these two in scripture who remind us we can be honest with you about our disappointments and fears. This morning some of us need to hear that it is okay to name those with you rather than run from or silence them. God, some of us are far down the road into things that are life-taking rather than life-giving. We've been avoiding and numbing out for so long, so done with hope that we're not even sure we can believe in it again. Reveal yourself to us, God. Open our eyes and our hearts to recognize you in the ways you show up – through your Spirit, through your Church, through your creation. Wipe the scales from our eyes and hearts, Jesus. We want to see you today and declare but we have hope! And hope's name is Jesus.

God of mercy and grace, we invite you to dwell with us always. To walk with us, teach, nourish, and send us as we live as people of resurrection hope. In the name of the Risen Christ we pray, Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-luke-2413-35-5>

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