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THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER—CYCLE A

THE SHORT WALK HOME

The Text: Luke 24:13-35

In the waiting rooms at hospitals family members and close friends huddle together and whisper to each other throughout the vigil, “As long as there is the life, there is hope.” And medically, there is a lot of truth to that saying. But equally true is the reverse of that axiom. “As long as there is hope, there is life.” Without hope we shrivel and die. It is hope that keeps the stranded mountain climber alive until the rescue team finds him. It is hope that keeps the prisoner of war alive during her seemingly endless capture. As long as there is hope, there is life.

Our Gospel lesson today from Saint Luke is a story about hope lost, and hope restored; about a long hard walk into the face of the wind of hopelessness, and a short walk back with the wind of hope at the back.

Jesus was executed as a common criminal of the state. It was a Friday. Then it was Saturday, and the grief of that death began to sink in to the followers of Jesus, those hardy souls who believed he was the Messiah, the redeemer of Israel. But now it was over. Jesus was dead. And everyone knows that when you are dead, the game is over, and everything goes back in the box. Then it was Sunday, and the crushing reality of a new week dawned upon them. They had to leave Jerusalem and start rebuilding a life without Jesus, a life without the presence and power they felt when they were with him, a life without the future and the vision for the Kingdom of God he helped them believe was so wonderfully imminent.

It would be a long, lonely walk away from Jerusalem that Sunday for these two former disciples of Jesus. Was it only a week ago that they entered this town flanked by adoring multitudes crying “Hosanna” and waving palm fronds? How wonderful the future looked just one week ago! But now they leave the city with dejection, with shoulders slumped, dragging the heavy steps of disillusionment and despair. Grief does that to us, doesn’t it? It simply sucks the life force right out of us, and even the simplest tasks seem impossible. “How do you carry on when everything you lived for, and hoped for, is taken away?” This is the question that haunts the minds of the grief-stricken, and it is the question these two disciples ponder in silence as they leave Jerusalem that Sunday so long ago.

If you have lived long enough, you have walked where these two are walking. What they have lost, along with the death of Jesus himself, is hope. You can hear it in their voice when they explain the recent events and their feelings to the “stranger” who suddenly joins them along the way, “We had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel.” Of course, in an ironic twist, the stranger was none other than

Jesus himself, but when you lose hope you cannot recognize a new day, even when it dawns. When you lose hope you do not recognize the presence of love and care, even if you are surrounded by it.

But Jesus is not upset with the two followers for failing to recognize him. He is patient, and he walks further with them, opening their minds to understand the scriptures, and later opening their eyes as he broke bread and shared it over dinner. Recovering hope can be long process. It cannot be microwaved. But Jesus came back from the dead for just such hope-starved souls. He came back to give hope to the hopeless, and life to the lifeless. He came back for us.

So what did these two disciples do when they suddenly realized that it was Jesus who had been traveling with them that entire day, that it was Jesus who blessed and broke the bread with them at the table, just as he had done so many times during the past? Did they decide to keep this intimate knowledge to themselves? No, such good news must be shared; it must be shouted from the roof tops. The logical thing, the safe thing to do, would be to wait until daybreak to return to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. In this first century, few people traveled at night. There were no lighted roads, and the danger of thieves or other mishaps multiplied at night.

But these two disciples did not do the logical thing. They did not do the safe thing. They set out immediately to return to Jerusalem with the good news of Jesus' resurrection. Imagine that! Only hours ago they were so tired in the middle of the day they could barely put one foot in front of the other. Now, late in the evening, they can almost fly along that same road as if they were the energizer bunny. What happened? Where did this new-found energy come from?

You know. The new energy filling their hearts, and strengthening their legs, is called hope. This is the energy that compels the crippled grandmother to rise from her porch and run down the lane to hug the long-lost granddaughter who was a prisoner of war. This is the force that brings the weary family and friends in the hospital waiting room to their feet in jubilation at the news their loved one will survive the surgery. As long as there is hope, there is life.

So what do we know about hope, besides that it is the force that keeps us alive in the face of daunting challenge? Hope cannot be manufactured, like positive thinking or a New Year's resolution. Hope is not just wishful thinking. Real hope is a gift from God. Second, hope is not a private gift, it is a shared within community. Like burning coals in a fire pit, hope shared lasts longer and burns brighter when huddled next to other hope-filled souls. That is the reason these two followers of Jesus had to return to the community of disciples. Hope is a shared gift. It comes to us on its way to another. As theologian Paul Waddell said, "We are called to be persons who embody hope for one another. We have to be each other's partners in hope."

I like that phrase, "partners in hope." That is what Christians are for each other, partners in hope. And as we bless the bread, and break it, and share it together around this table today, I am hoping we will have our minds and eyes opened, like those two disciples so long ago, and find that Jesus is actually here with us, closer than our next breath or our next heartbeat. He is alive, and hope is alive. Even death does not have the final say. And this hope is not just wishful thinking, or delusional naiveté. It is the living hope that sets our feet and our voices free, a hope that brings us back home again into the arms of the community of God. Have you noticed, the road home to family and friends is never a long one, is it?