

Text: Luke 24: 13-35

Let's imagine this scenario: Your favourite person suggests dinner out, and has made a reservation. You get excited, dress up, but when you see what has been chosen as “nice restaurant,” your heart sinks. Maybe it goes from bad to worse. You order “chicken cordon bleu” and what comes out is a hunk of dry meat with a piece of processed cheese draped over it. The word for what you are experiencing is DISAPPOINTMENT, and it has to do with the gap between what you had expected and what actually happened.

Disappointment can happen with anything, anywhere, anytime, because we always create ideas in our heads about what things *should* be like/look like. Disappointment can happen with things as mundane as “ice cream Sundae” (you call that an ice cream sundae? Fake whip cream? No cherry? That's not real chocolate sauce) to the new power drill you bought that chokes and sputters, to a movie or book *someone* said was really good but bores you to tears, to the beautiful tomatoes you carefully tended all summer that get eaten by squirrels, to much more difficult situations, like the nursing home that is NOT clean and caring, or the perfectly healthy adult child who does not seem at all motivated to look for work. Disappointment. It has to do with expectations.

I learned a little about expectations one year when a group from our church was heading off to Haiti. A woman experienced in cross-cultural learning was helping us prepare. The first thing she did was ask us: “what are your expectations?” The funny thing about expectations is that often we don't even realize we have them, until we are faced with what we *hadn't* expected. At that point, we can be tempted to blame someone rather than realize: “Oh! I guess I had different expectations!” The more we can become aware of our expectations “in advance”, the more we can accept life as it actually unfolds.

So, what expectations have been dashed for you in this past week? And what have you done with those expectations?

In our gospel story, 2 people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus are trying to come to terms with their expectations. The word “but” is the clue: “*But we had thought..... We had thought* that he was the one who would free Israel.” Their expectations have been dashed. Death and crucifixion had not been part of *their* plan for Jesus. They had hoped for “freedom” ---what

kind of freedom? An overthrow of the Romans? An overthrow of the temple establishment? We don't entirely know, but just about anything would have been better than the ignominious ending they had seen at Golgotha: Jesus dying the worst of all humiliating deaths, in between 2 thieves. To add insult to injury, Jesus seems to have gone into this death willingly. He did not defend himself. The whole story, at this point, is soul-sapping.

This is how our story begins. This is the "before" picture. The "after" picture is 2 disciples hurrying back to Jerusalem, late at night, they are so excited, they are so moved, so energized, so changed. So: what happened to bring about such a transformation?

4 things happened in there:

1. They hear familiar stories interpreted in a new way. Those disciples were probably like us: If there is a story we have heard a few times, we think we know what it means. Jesus walking along the road with them opens their minds to a new way of understanding bible stories, through the lens of his life, his body, his words, his forgiveness, his experience of humiliation and resurrection. We are all still in need of this kind of teaching, even me the minister. Scripture still needs to be opened up to us; there is no end to the layers and layers of meanings that can illuminate and set us free. We seem to always lean towards forms of bondage; we keep needing the resurrected forgiving Jesus be our guide to scripture and all of life.
2. Their hearts burn within them. Whatever was happening in that conversation along the road, it wasn't just all a "head trip." It wasn't all simply about ideas. Their hearts were touched. By this we are not to understand it as simply "emotion." The Hebrew understanding of "heart" is: the center of our being, the place where we know in such a way that we are moved to do and act. Somehow, in this conversation with Jesus, it reached into their very being. Do you ever have conversations like this? That reach into your very being? What kinds of conversations are those?
3. The stranger took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them. The physical actions of the stranger's hands was, for Cleopas and his friend, the beginning of an experience of "presence". They had seen Jesus' hands move through these motions before, so when they moved through the sequence, it was much more than simply another meal. They were taken into the presence of God in Jesus. We human beings, we know that God is Spirit, but we experience God in our bodies, associated with actions, sequences of

actions, and movements: visible signs of invisible grace (like the baptism we saw today). We need times when we feel that we are in the presence of God. That presence can come through anything, at any moment, one of those moments being through the sacraments, through bread and wine and water. We can experience what those disciples did: a sense of the living presence of Christ, with us, in our room, right in the midst of our lives, in the midst of all our scattered and ruined expectations for what we thought our lives should look like: there is Christ, at our table.

4. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Christ had been there all along, walking beside them, talking with them, but they had not recognized him. I wonder if that is the case with us too, most of the time. Christ is walking along beside us, and we pray: “be with us, come to us” but Christ is already there. It is us, whose eyes have become clouded, unable to see. If that is the case, then, our daily prayer might more properly be “open our eyes, O God, that we might see how you are walking along the road with us.”

So, let’s come back to the question of expectations. We too have certain expectations of God, how God will act; what God will do, or what God needs from us in order for the church to flourish. And then we hit a wall. It might be a tragedy, a loss, a health issue, physical pain that will not subside. Or it might be a person who thinks differently from us. And our expectations for who God is and what God is supposed to do (and how) gets challenged. We are disappointed, confused, lost, like those disciples on the road to Emmaus. We had thought . . . that God and the church would be there for us in a certain particular way.

What if, precisely at our point of disappointment and lostness, we remember that the resurrected Christ is actually with us. What if, precisely at our point of confusion, we open ourselves to the story of the road to Emmaus, and let ourselves be fed, with word, with bread, maybe with the memory of our own baptisms. I wonder if our hearts, too, might burn, and we might begin to know, in some new way, the joy that sent those disciples running into the night, bursting with a conviction deep in their being, moving them out of despair, giving them good news that could not be contained: Death is not the last word. God comes seeking to meet us, full of truth and love. Christ is with us. May we know it as true, deep in our being.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

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