

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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From Disillusionment to Hope

Luke 24:13-35

What a contrast between our hearts and heads lifted high on Easter last Sunday, and the drooping expressions on the faces of the disciples in today's text from Luke. While we're still singing songs of resurrection, they're intoning mournful rhythms of death and despair. As far as they can tell, there's no reason to add the fourth verse of "Were You There." The end of verse three captures it all: "Were you there when they laid him in the tomb."

The way they see things, that's where the story of Jesus ended, at the graveyard. His burial was the closing chapter of his life and mission. So when a stranger comes up and engages them in conversation about recent events, Luke says of these two disciples: "They stood still, their faces downcast" (v. 17b). That's because when Jesus was nailed to the cross, so were their expectations. Their hopes got crucified too. After summarizing Jesus' ministry, suffering, and death, they say, "but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (v. 21a). It had looked like the promises of the Scriptures were about to be fulfilled in Jesus. Through him, God was finally going to rescue his people and set things right in the world. But now, those dreams, those aspirations of freedom and justice and peace and flourishing, were over. The powers that be were still in power. Violence and suffering and death had once again won out.

In a poem titled "Dreams," African American writer Langston Hughes tried to capture the common heartaches and struggles of people in his neighborhood:

Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams,
for when dreams go,
life is a barren field,
frozen with snow.

For Cleopas and the other disciple traveling with him, the walk to Emmaus was the beginning of a process of letting go of their dreams about Jesus, and about what he preached, practiced, and promised. But have they forgotten that those promises included predictions of his own suffering and death? Turns out that's the spot where the risen Jesus begins to work upon their hearts and minds. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (vv. 25-26).

But right now it's hard for them to see Jesus in his risen glory, mainly because he has appeared to them in a not-so-glorious fashion. He's with them in the form of a stranger, a traveling companion who's willing to walk miles with them, and abide with them, slowly but surely opening their eyes to see him, and thus to see that the reports from the women were true. He really is alive. This means that their hopes for themselves, and for God's people Israel, weren't dead and buried after all. On the contrary, God's promises were true. The Scriptures really had been fulfilled, just not in the way that they were anticipating.

Sometimes things aren't what they appear to be. A few years ago, a couple of days before Easter, I received an email with some engaging imagery and language. The first thing that caught my eye was the background photo. A lush green hillside, covered with marigolds, leading up to a bright blue sky, with the sun beaming out in all directions. The whole picture just pulsed with a sense of spring, life, and resurrection. And stretched across the horizon, in bright red letters, was an announcement: "IT'S ALL FORGIVEN!" An extremely quick glance made me think this must be an Easter greeting from a Christian organization, a denominational agency, or maybe a religious publisher, highlighting our redemption in Christ. But no, this newsflash was actually from Waldorf Chevrolet Cadillac, spreading the glad tidings of their latest trade in event. Does your car have scratches, dings, dents, and lots of miles? No worries. It's all forgiven! Bring it on in for a great deal. So what I first thought might be an offer of new life turned out to be an offer for a new set of wheels.

Sometimes what looks very Easterish may not be. Or, on the other hand, what doesn't look very Easterish may be. Like the inconspicuous stranger in today's story, who turns out to be the living Lord. At first, Cleopas and his fellow disciple didn't think this stranger knew anything about recent events in Jerusalem. But in reality he knew everything. In fact, this stranger didn't just know the news; He was the news. He was Jesus incognito. And by the time he was through opening the Scriptures and breaking the bread, their eyes, and not just their ears, had been opened to his identity. You see, with Jesus at their side, they had travelled a long road from disillusionment to hope.

Not that they didn't originally have some hope. Recall that they had been hoping for the redemption of God's people. They had been anticipating liberation from their oppressors. They had been waiting for the arrival of God's reign. But when it showed up in such unexpected form, namely the death of the Messiah, they didn't recognize it. They needed divine help in order to truly see the coming of the Lord, and to put their hope in him.

In our own lives, the journey into deeper faith is often a movement from disillusionment to hope. We ourselves are shaped by what we expect. What we expect of ourselves. What we expect of others. What we expect of the world. What we expect of God. But so much of the time, reality doesn't conform to our expectations. You mess up, and your sins against God and against others disrupt the way you wanted things to turn out. Or other people hurt you. Or the church lets you down. Or unexpected events shatter your dreams. Or the world's problems persist, despite your best efforts to make a difference. Or God doesn't do what you think God should do, or act the way you had hoped God would act. When actual circumstances run counter to what you expect, you can end up deeply disappointed. And your disappointment can feed into disillusionment.

Jerome Frank, a doctor at John Hopkins, once talked about what he calls our "assumptive world." In other words, all of us make assumptions about life, about ourselves, about others, about God. We make assumptions about the nature of reality, about the way things are. He goes on to argue that when things turn out in a way that's consistent with our assumptions about reality, then we tend to be more happy and well-adjusted. But when our assumptions fall short of reality, or collide with reality, then we can become confused, angry, and disillusioned.¹ No wonder author Anne Lamott has said, "Expectations are resentments under construction."²

I'm not saying that we're better off living without expectations. In some respects, expectations can be good. They can bind us together in significant relationships, and hold us together in community. Expectations can be part of the way that we grow, achieve, and make progress in life. They can help us persevere through adversity and move toward a brighter future. Expectations can sustain us and motivate our efforts toward a better life for ourselves and others. Having expectations is part of what it means to be human.

But from a Christian standpoint, we need to have our expectations shaped and formed by what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's because expectations are inseparable from discipleship. After you come to faith in Jesus Christ, your expectations, like everything else about you, have to go through a process of sanctification. In other words, your progress in holiness includes having your expectations refined and reworked in light of the cross.

In his book *The Image*, historian Daniel Boorstin makes the following observation about Americans' inflated expectations:

We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a "church of our choice" and yet feel its guiding power over us, to revere God and to be God. Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.³

Unmet expectations can leave you disappointed and disillusioned. But the good news is that your disillusionment can become the place and the space where God works to redirect your hope. After all, isn't that part of what our expectations reveal? They show us where we're placing our ultimate confidence in life. If we're expecting so much more than the world can offer, then the problem isn't just with the world, but also with us and our misplaced hopes. We're staking our future on things that simply can't deliver what they promise.

But there are better promises, more reliable promises, available to us. The promises of God. And in order to reconnect with them, you often have to go through disillusionment. You have to do exactly what the word says. You have to be *dis*-illusioned, freed from your illusions. As Jonathan Merritt puts it, disillusionment is "the loss of an illusion. It is what happens when you take a lie—about the world, about yourself, about those you love, about God—and replace it with the truth. Disillusionment occurs when God shatters our fantasies, tears down our idols, and dismantles our cardboard cutouts. It occurs when we discover that God does not conform to our expectations but rather exists as a mystery beyond those expectations."⁴

Luke says, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight" (vv. 30-31). The risen Lord, with us, but not bound by us. Not within or under our control. As I said earlier, sometimes we get disillusioned, not just because of events and circumstances, but because God isn't being who we think he should be, doing what we think he should be doing, or acting the way we think he should act. But we know of the cross. We know of his love and faithfulness displayed there. And we know the cross wasn't the end. Together, the cross and the resurrection confirm that Jesus really is the one who would redeem us. The one who would dismantle our illusions, open our eyes, and help us see that in him, and him alone, is our hope.

¹ Frank's argument is summarized by Haddon Robinson in his sermon, "How Does God Keep His Promises?" Preaching Today, Tape No. 130.

² Lamott is quoted in Jonathan Merritt, "Palm Sunday and the Gift of Disillusionment." Christianity Today website. April 12, 2019. Accessed April 25, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april-web-only/jonathan-merritt-palm-sunday-gift-disillusionment.html>>.

³ Quoted in Barry Morrow, *Yearning for More* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) 19-20.

⁴ Merritt, "Palm Sunday and the Gift of Disillusionment."