

## **“Life After Easter: Loss and Resurrection Hope”**

Luke 24:13-35

A Sermon for DaySpring

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(In Honor of My Father, John Quincy Parsons, 1925- )

Last week, we explored the role of anguished doubt in our Resurrection faith. This week, I'd like us to take a step back and consider some of the root causes of anguished doubt, loss and disappointment. Last week was general and theological—the woundedness of the world is taken up into the very heart of God and overcome and borne upward into Light. This week is intensely personal and particular because loss is always personal and particular. Although I am not necessarily the best equipped person in this room to explore this aspect of Life after Easter, the lectionary lot, so it seems, has fallen to (or on!) me (I've really got to check that church calendar more closely before I accept invitations to preach!). And, of course, I am under no illusion that I can do justice to this topic in 20 minutes, but perhaps I can begin a conversation among us about the impact of our Resurrection hope in the midst of loss and failure.

*Prayer. O God illuminate us, through and despite my halting efforts and limited vision and give us hearts to hear.*

“The accident happened just over there,” the man pointed with his left hand toward a dilapidated old barbed wire fence standing on the crown of a small hill. “When I was thirteen years old, I was supposed to be plowing my Daddy’s field. But Dad also had a fifty-acre apple orchard, and some boys came by and wanted to go to the orchard. So I put the horses in the barn and went with them. Dad was gone. They had their guns, so I got grandpa’s gun and went with them. When I got to the top of the hill there, I put my gun against the fence, and as I tried to cross over, the barbed wire caught the trigger and the gun went off and shot me right here.” He rubbed the place where the prosthesis was attached to the stub of what remained of his right arm. He stared off into the distance, slowly conjuring up the memory in his mind’s eye. “The boys flagged down a truck, and the driver took me to the hospital, but they couldn’t save my arm.” The year was 1991, and the man—my father—was then 66 years old, recounting an event that happened ½ a century earlier.

I had heard my father tell this story 100 times. But this time was different. This time we were standing at the very place where the accident had happened. This time I could reach out and touch the wire that had cost him his arm. This time I was standing with my two children, who were hearing this story, really hearing this story, for the first time. This time, I understood that his wound had somehow become my wound because this time everything nailed down in my life was coming loose, and I had come home to be “home.”

After he finished telling his story, I impulsively walked up to the fence and broke off one of the posts to keep as a reminder of the event (I now understand a bit better the medieval attraction, almost irresistible, to the relics of the saints). And for the first time, I was also moved to ask him if thought he had lost anything in the accident besides his arm. He paused and thought for a moment and replied, “Well, I always wanted to be a professional baseball player.” I never knew. Many little boys during that era wanted to be baseball players like Lou Gehrig or Joe DiMaggio when they grew up, just like many boys and girls today want to be soccer players or basketball players or baseball and

softball players. Most of us, of course, have to adjust to the reality that we aren't strong enough, or fast enough, or can't throw a ball as hard as Nolan Ryan or kick one as straight as Mia Hamm or shoot one as softly as Stephen Curry. But that reality comes slowly; it's a different matter altogether to have that dream ripped from you as easily as gunshot can rip through flesh, and bone and sinew.

The story of Emmaus, like my father's story, is fundamentally and irreducibly, a story of loss. The Emmaus travelers were mourners, "disillusioned over what might have been. "Jesus had failed to meet their expectations. The person they fervently believed would become the new king of Israel, not only wasn't ruling Israel but was in his grave. The candle of their messianic hopes has been snuffed out. His closest followers were in hiding. Their homeland was still ruled by Romans. . . . The kingdom of God that Jesus had said was already present now seemed infinitely distant."

The NRSV captures the hopelessness of their situation: "*We had hoped* he was the one to redeem Israel," suggesting that they had at that point ceased to hope. Augustine understands it this way as well: "We," they said, "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." O my dear disciples, you had hoped! So now you no longer hope? Look, Christ is alive! Is hope dead in you?" (Augustine, *Sermon 235.2*)

So Luke here provides us with another look at Life After Easter. For all of us, at one time or another, travel the Road to Emmaus. What is that road? Barbara Brown Taylor has put it well: "The Road to Emmaus is the road of deep disappointment, and walking it is the living definition of sad. It is the road you walk when you lose a big game, or your candidate for office loses, or you lose your job, or you lose your loved one to death. It is the long road of loss. It is the long road back to an empty house, an empty seat at the table, an empty place in bed next to you. The Road to Emmaus is real."

Yes, the road to Emmaus is real, and it is a journey bound to be repeated again and again. A religion professor tells of the time he was part of a tour group visiting the Holy Land, and their next stop was Emmaus. When the bus arrived at the church which marked the traditional site, the church was locked. It wasn't supposed to be, but apparently the caretaker had been delayed. In the midst of their disappointment the guide said: "Not to worry. There's another Emmaus." Turns out, there are no less than four sites that compete for the traditional location of Emmaus. And in the "Life after Easter," there's always another Emmaus.

Certain kinds of losses are, simply put, catastrophic—loss of limb, loss of a marriage, loss of job or home, loss of health, even loss of a beloved pastor(!), and certainly, as the Emmaus disciples knew, loss of a loved one. These catastrophes take no particular aim at the wicked and no particular detour around the righteous, and they are stubbornly resistant to any facile answers to the question "why?" Nor is there any "one-size-fits-all self-help plan" for dealing with such loss. But we do have, in our "Life after Easter," resources to draw on from our faith tradition in times of loss.

And the witness of Scripture is one of those resources. Emmaus provides several clues about the relationship of hope and loss in life after Easter. We begin with the recognition that the Emmaus path to spiritual illumination and growth is a downward one. This truth is hard to hear in a culture that values and honors those whose blind ambitions lead them upward and onward. Loss and failure are to be avoided at all costs, and this escapism and denial can lead down a self-destructive path. This is the path my father first took. He sought solace in work in a world which says "Get all you can, can all you get,

and sit on your can"! He was bound and determined to make it as a one-armed man in a two-armed world. He worked fourteen hour days at his sawmill job and when work didn't "work" my father sought solace in the bottom of a fifth of whiskey he hid in the barbecue pit outside our house or in the beer joints he frequented on weekends. Of course, there are many causes of alcoholism, genetic and otherwise, but clearly part of the reason my father's life went into an out-of-control tailspin was because of his persistent denial of what he had lost on that warm August morning in 1938. The path to wholeness, on the other hand, is downward as we turn to embrace the loss and pray for transforming grace. The old Shaker hymn is surely right: "tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to *come down* where we *ought* to be."

The Emmaus story also suggests we must remain open to the Other, the Stranger, the one different from us. "At the heart of the Emmaus story is the stranger. . . Pilgrimage is not possible if it excludes unexpected people found along the way" (Forest 174-75). The Stranger in the story provides new insight and fresh perspective to the events about which he is the "only one in Jerusalem" who has knowledge! At about the age of 50, after a divorce and re-marriage, and continuing bouts with alcoholism, my father had an encounter with the "Other," if not strange to him, then totally so to me! A fundamentalist, pentecostal, Bible-thumping, tongue-speaking, Holy-rolling, baptized in the Holy Ghost, full Gospel, Assemblies of God preacher with a heart full of Jesus and a love for people crossed my father's path, and through this "Other" Christ came to my father. And he miraculously, though certainly not easily, daily turns his back on his formerly destructive and addictive way of life and embraces a "new life" in Christ, a life he has been living fully and well now into his 84<sup>th</sup> year. Are there "helping Strangers" in your life? For me, the "Other" was a devout Roman Catholic with a New York accent and a New York attitude through whom God turned my world upside down—or right side up!

Emmaus also exposes the half-truth of our culture that since every loss is personal with its own distinctive contours and lines that we must face our loss in isolation. Of course, some spiritual work must surely be done alone, perhaps with the help of a counselor or spiritual advisor, but spiritual wholeness cannot finally happen in isolation. The Emmaus story offers another, more compelling path. We make the journey in community together, with fellow disciples. Cleopas is joined by an unnamed disciple. Much ink has been spilt on that disciple's identity. Was it Cleopas' son? His wife? The Apostle Peter? Luke the evangelist? My own suspicion is that Luke, in a deft bit of story-telling leaves the disciple unnamed, a kind of Cleopas and "state your name" move, in order that that the audience might more easily find a place in the story. So that *we* might find a place in the story. The Emmaus journey downward requires a community of faith who will journey with us, a community of "blessed brokenness." After years of aimless wandering, my father found such a community in his little Assemblies church. And when I look around this room, I see the faces of friends who have walked down my Emmaus Roads with me, and I am enormously grateful to God for a church like DaySpring that provides space for that downward journey in community together.

At the end of the story, Christ makes himself known to Cleopas and "state your name" around the table in the breaking of bread. Immediately they return to Jerusalem to share their experience of hearts strangely warmed; the inward journey must always lead outward. These are the "tracks of fellow strugglers," the cloud of witnesses who have

gone before us and who provide markings on the trail that say, “try this, it helped”; “stay away from that, that’s a dead end.” “Rest here; it’s where Christ found us.”

Years ago, Nick Wolterstorff, professor emeritus at Yale and friend to a number of DaySpringers, wrote *Lament for a Son* after his son, Eric, died in a mountain-climbing accident in Europe. The loss was life-changing, transforming him, as he admits, into a better person. Would he have given up this new found wisdom for the chance to undo his loss? Of course, Nick says, “without a moment’s hesitation I would exchange all those changes for Eric back.” But he couldn’t undo the moment his son’s foot slipped on the side of that mountain, so instead he gives us the gift of his brutally honest reflections on loss and hope in the only mode of discourse faithful to his experience—the lament. Nick describes his faith as “a bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness” but still the faith of an “aching visionary” whose newly constituted Resurrection Hope does not—cannot—deny the excruciating reality of the pain of loss. But now that Hope holds a place for regret and “the hope for that Great Day coming when we can all throw ourselves into each other’s arms and say, ‘I’m sorry.’” Hear the words also of another fellow traveler, John Claypool, who wrote these words shortly after his eight year old daughter, Laura Lue, was diagnosed with acute leukemia, and he repeated them forty years later in a book published not long before his own death: “How can I yet pronounce good or evil or hopeless what lies in the Great Not Yet? Despair is presumption. But best of all: I have a vision of God, . . . who is powerful enough and resourceful enough to endure the worst that evil can do and then out of it bring his best.”

Not everyone, of course, is as eloquent, even in pain, as a Wolterstorff or a Claypool, and most of us won’t choose the medium of a book to share our experience. But share we must. My father is now a wise man, but he is not a man of letters. Still, he bears witness to God’s grace in life’s losses however he can. This past February he got his first computer for his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and he’s been sending left-handed emails ever since. He knows about this sermon, and he sent me an email this week that said, “Tell my story, Mike, if you think it will help anybody draw closer to God.”

The Emmaus circumstances of Life after Easter can strip us down to our bare, essential, sometimes amputated, self. But with the help of “Christ in mouth of friend and stranger,” we take the downward path. In a moment of “second naiveté” the bumper sticker theology of “Let Go and Let God” that once seemed so shallow and cavalier, becomes an expression of the deepest Truth. We sink down in the Psalmist’s fragile hope that we are sinking not into the Abyss but into the Deep, Deep Love of God, who surrounds us, who is Above and Beneath us, Before and Behind us—in whom Hope floats with an unexpected and undeserved buoyancy.

I don’t know how your Christian journey began. Perhaps some of you had a Damascus Road experience of salvation, in which God decisively and dramatically turned you in the opposite, life-giving direction. Others may have come to Christ on the Roman Road to salvation with its syllogistic solution to the soteriological puzzle. Others may be meandering on a nameless path still seeking an encounter with the Living God. There are many paths by which we can join this Christian journey, but this I know: that journey always, always, passes through the loss and disappointment of Emmaus. May God’s grace enable us to walk together this journey of Life after Easter in the Hope that our eyes once again will be opened to the transforming grace of the Resurrected Christ! So we pray and so we hope.