

## The Road to Emmaus, the Road to Hope

Two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" And he replied to them, "What things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see." And he said to them,

"Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. But he vanished from their sight. ]

-- Luke 24:13-31

There comes a time in the struggle for peace and justice when we hit rock bottom, when we want to give up, when the

pain around us is too much to bear, when all hope seems lost. In that moment, our expectations of Jesus crash, we throw up our hands, fold up our tents, and admit defeat. We leave our community, our commitment, our convictions, turn our backs on Jesus and his mission, and head home.

On that day, on that long walk home, Jesus sneaks up on us, like Flannery O'Connor's ragged figure "flitting from tree to tree." "What are you discussing as you walk along?" he asks on our journey of despair. We do not recognize him. We see only a stranger. We are downcast. We have no hope. We cannot look up. We do not look into his eyes.

"You must be the only one who does not know the things that have been going on lately," we tell our politically out-of-touch, traveling companion.

"What things?" he asks.

What things? After all he has been through, after his betrayal, arrest, torture, execution, and resurrection, Jesus asks, "What things?"! The Gospel is a study in understatement. Instead of reprimanding us, yelling at us, or condemning us for killing him, the humble, risen Jesus listens to our complaints before speaking. He wants to know why we stray from the discipleship journey.

The two wayfarers speak of dashed hopes, of the state's execution of Christ, of the mysterious tale of resurrection, and the plain fact that they do not see him anymore. "We had hoped...", they lament, shaking their heads, limping along the road to Emmaus. "We had hoped...."

That famous past pluperfect! We had hoped! How often we give up hope and give in to despair.

Hope keeps faith when all appears lost. Hope hangs in there when everyone else says let go. Hope is tested not in good times, but in the crucible.

The two disciples have given up hope in Christ. We know well their despair. We too complain about our dashed hopes. We had hoped things would change. We had hoped God would intervene. We had hoped humanity would stop its wars, feed its poor, live in peace. We had hoped justice would come. We had hoped the church would reform. We had hoped Jesus would be victorious. We had hoped death would not get the

last word. We had hoped God's realm would come to earth. We had hoped..." Alas for such hopes!

"God, You must be the only one who does not know what's going on," we mutter under our breath as we walk away from the church, from the struggle for social change, from one another. "Don't you know about the government's crucifixion of the world's poor, its latest war, its latest nuclear submarine launch, its latest military spending increase? Don't you know nonviolence doesn't work against the culture of death?" we cry out. "We had hoped that Jesus would bring his reign here and now, and take over Jerusalem in the name of Israel. But now we know: it will not happen. He was a utopian dreamer. His words are idealistic. They can not be applied to today's global horrors. We have to get on with our lives. We have to survive in the real world. There's no point in wasting our time struggling for disarmament or justice with Jesus. We were wrong. He failed. He made no real difference. We can't make a difference either. There's nothing that can be done. We have to go our own way now."

"How foolish you are!" the stranger tells us. "How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

Was it not necessary?

The voice of despair can not grasp such hope. No, it was not necessary for Jesus to be arrested, jailed, tortured, and executed. What difference did it make? The world is brimming with injustice, starvation, war, murder, and

weapons of mass destruction. Things are worse now than during Jesus' earthly lifetime. We stand on the brink of environmental destruction, if not global warfare, with our weapons stockpile. Jesus' nonviolence has not been accepted. The idols of greed and violence rule the world. His death gave

birth to a church, yes, but look at its sinfulness, its cooperation with

oppression, its silence before global injustice, its unwillingness to risk nonviolent action, its sexism and

racism and blindness. No, it was not necessary that Jesus suffered and died.

We want change here and now, immediately, on our terms. We want to see the results of a new world and we want to be part of that powerful takeover.

Jesus sees things from an entirely different perspective. He looks through the long haul lens of history, at every human being, from the beginning of time until the end of time. He looks at us with the eyes of God. He sees way beyond our limited, historical struggles. He knows the big picture.

And so Jesus will not, can not, accept our despair. He is the voice of hope. One can only marvel at his patience, his insistence, his shining vision. He has been crucified and raised from the dead, yet he goes back to square one. He engages the hopeless in discussion, explaining the entire story of salvation. He outlines the scriptures to them. He reviews the journey of

faith from Moses through the prophets to himself. He explains the biblical path of nonviolent resistance which led him to the cross, new life, and glory. He invites them to see the wisdom of the paschal mystery. And in the process, without their knowing it, he opens their eyes, restores their vision, and renews their hope.

The Christ has not failed his mission, he explains. In fact, just the opposite is true. Christ has been raised. The way of nonviolence has triumphed. God is glorified. The culture of death and destruction is crumbling. The old world is falling away. The new realm of God's peace and justice is at hand. Suffering accepted in love in the pursuit of truth and justice bears immeasurable fruit, if one only believes and holds out for the long haul. Unearned suffering is redemptive. Christ has shown this. He was walked through the crucible of nonviolence and lives on. Not only has Christ's life born fruit, it will continue to bear fruit throughout salvation history. God's reign of nonviolence and love has come in our midst. The world will be transformed. The powers of death have been overcome. Peace is at hand. Indeed, every human being will be invited into the reign of God. The nonviolent Christ, crushed, now risen, will "draw all unto himself."

Cheer up, he tells them. The struggle for peace and justice may be just beginning, but it has already been won!

Talk about hope! They are astonished. Who can resist such glowing faith,

such eye-opening vision, such contagious hope? This stranger believes that Christ's mission of justice and peace must be carried on even if there are no apparent results because he is convinced that Christ has overcome the

world and disarmed it.

They urge him to stay longer. They show kindness to him. They offer him hospitality. Come and eat with us, they tell Christ in disguise. He joins them at their table. He takes the bread. He blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. All at once, they recognize him.

Jesus! You're alive!

Just then, he vanishes. They turn around and run back to the community.

Their hearts blaze with hope. They have seen and now they believe. The risen Jesus walks with us, encouraging us not to give up hope. But, as Luke's tale explains, he is not seen in the profession of the creed. He is not seen in the re-telling of his life story. He is not seen in despair or faithlessness. He is recognized when we offer hospitality to the stranger in our midst, when meals are shared, when the bread of hope is broken.

They run back to Jerusalem, to the scene of the crime, to the community of nonviolent resistance. There, in that circle, they meet him again. There, in the community of nonviolence, he gives them his final word: Peace!

In this time of moral confusion, global destruction and spiritual blindness, who understands the things that happen around us? We do not see Christ in our midst. We feel overwhelmed by the government's militarism, oppression of the poor, legal protection of multi-national corporations, indifference to the world's starving masses, weapons sales to tyrants, funding for dictators, the ongoing environmental destruction, and spending cuts for education,

healthcare, employment and housing. We want the coming of a new world, but we give up hope that change is possible. We fall into the culture's despair believing that nothing can be done, that nonviolence does not make a difference, that the struggle for disarmament and justice is not worth the sacrifice.

But the risen Christ returns to us, urging us not to give up hope. He helps us remember the story of salvation, the history of nonviolent social change, right up through the abolitionist, civil rights, and anti-war movements. He invokes the wisdom of the cross, and invites us to follow him into the glory of resurrection. As we hear the good news of hope, welcome the visionary

stranger to our table, and break bread together, our hearts burn with excitement and we recognize Christ in our midst. Then, we return to the community of nonviolent resistance and carry on his campaign for peace. We take up the life struggle where he left off, filled with hope and the desire to be faithful to our risen Lord.

The risen Jesus is met on the road to Emmaus, the road of despair. As we

confess our infidelity and despair to him, allow his faith and hope to rekindle the fire in our hearts, and recognize him in the breaking of the bread, we turn around.

The road to Emmaus becomes the road to Jerusalem.

The road of despair becomes the road of hope.

The road of death becomes the road of life.

Christ goes ahead of us. Our hearts are burning within us. All we need do is follow him on the road to peace.

--- from Jesus the Rebel