

Hope on the Road of Escape

Luke 24:13-35

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Prayer: Risen Lord, you set hearts on fire when you opened the Scriptures to your friends. Fire our hearts today as we hear your word, so that we may receive you with joy. Amen

In this Sunday's Gospel, we find two disciples leaving town on foot. One is called Cleopas; the other is unnamed. But they're not just walking—but walking away, trying to escape from the memory of that Friday afternoon. Signs of frustration are written all over their faces. They staked their lives on the wrong savior. They left everything to follow him. Now this prophet, as they called him, is gone. And so is their **hope**.

"We had hoped," they said. "We had hope he was the one who would deliver Israel" (Lk. 24:21).

It's the language of a dream that has already died. So they head for Emmaus, a little town seven miles from Jerusalem. Now, nobody really knows where Emmaus is located today, but in a way, that doesn't matter. Emmaus isn't really a geographical place; it's a **state of mind**. The poet T.S. Eliot called it the "**human condition**." It's that place we go when we lower our expectations, settle back into the old routine, and try to stop regretting the visions we once had.¹

With their vision for the future fading, the disciples were heading back to square one—back to fishing, tax collecting, farming, carpentry, or whatever they did for a living before they followed Jesus.

Sobering as it may be, that may be our condition this morning, too. Maybe we've also felt like walking away. Three Sundays after Easter—do we still feel all the excitement and the alleluias? What difference does it make to proclaim Jesus has risen, we wonder, if death is still all around us?

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 170,000 to 174,000 people die each day worldwide.

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & world, 1950), 139.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=T.S.+Eliot+the+Human+Condition>

The Presbyterian minister and theologian Frederick Buechner said that *Emmaus* is anywhere we go to shrug our shoulders and say, "*Let the whole thing hang. It makes no difference anyway.*" He says *Emmaus* is the bar, the movie theater, the new car, the second-rate novel, or even just going through the motions at church. It is the place we go to **forget** that the world holds nothing sacred and that even the noblest ideas eventually get twisted by selfish people.²

There's a reason Buechner's words sting. They sting because they describe our greatest temptation: **the urge to simply stop caring**. We tell ourselves that if we feel nothing, we can't be hurt. It's an enticing trap—because if nothing is sacred, then nothing can break your heart.

It's easy to see this happening today. We live in a world where nothing is inviolable, nothing has intrinsic value anymore. Everything is a transaction. We're led by people who believe that "whatever works" is the only rule. But when truth and morality become relative, **we lose our compass**—and even the most noble vision can be twisted into a tool for control.

Take mental health and self-care. Today, the very way we talk about these things is being hijacked by **toxic positivity**. Toxic positivity is the demand that you stay upbeat no matter how dire the circumstances. It sounds like hope, but it's been twisted into a **weapon of silence**. Toxic positivity erases the reality of the human experience. It acts as a shield for failing systems. Why address low pay or overwork when you can just offer a meditation app? It's a clever trick: it moves the blame for burnout from the company to the employee.

But it's not only in behavioral health. In politics and religion, noble ideas have also been hijacked by people with selfish agenda. We see these in the concepts of the *Kingdom of God* and the *Divine Right of Kings*. In many traditions, the "Kingdom of God" represents a vision of ultimate justice, peace, and the equality of all people before God. It's an idea meant to **humble the powerful and uplift the lowly**.

It's in Jesus' teachings about **social reversals**. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," to quote one of the Beatitudes. Jesus' "kingdom ethics" is diametrically opposed to the standard of the world then and now.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 85-86.

When two of the disciples, James and John, asked for the “best seats” in the coming Kingdom, Jesus reminded them what **true greatness** is, saying,

.... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-45).

However, throughout history, monarchs twisted the “Kingdom of God” theology into the Divine Right of Kings. They claimed their power came directly from the Creator, which meant that to disagree with the King was to sin against God. They took a concept meant to humble the powerful and used it to demand absolute, unquestionable control.

We see this same pattern today whenever the language of faith is used to wrap up personal or political ambition—claiming to represent God or Jesus as a test of one’s patriotism. We see it in slogans that have crept into our common life: “America: God’s Chosen Nation” or “One Nation Under God,” used not as a statement of unity but as a boundary for exclusion.

These ideas are dangerous because they take a noble sense of identity and twist it into a tool for dominance. In this rhetoric, faith is no longer an invitation to follow a humble Savior; it’s a citizenship test. It suggests that if you don’t follow one specific brand of Christianity, you are not a “true” American. It turns the cross from a **symbol of sacrifice** into a **tool for exclusion**. It is deeply frustrating to see the teachings of Jesus hijacked this way.

But the temptation to exploit power exists across the political spectrum whenever we lose sight of the sacred. When the world feels this cynical, our first instinct is to retreat, to escape, to look away in disappointment. It reminds me of the old song in the 50’s by Ricky Nelson—*Lonesome Town*.

*In the town of broken dreams
The streets are filled with regret.
Maybe down in Lonesome Town
I can learn to forget.*

Forget. The disciples were trying to forget the horrendous events of the past week. But they can’t. They cannot forget because, as the evening

comes, a stranger joins them. Jesus shows up, unrecognized, and asks, “What are you talking about as you walk along?”

Cleopas said, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know what has taken place there over the last few days?”

“What things?” Jesus feigns surprise.

So they are forced to retell the story of their pain. But in the retelling, no matter how painful, something shifts. Jesus interrupts their limited human understanding with the clarity of God’s perspective. He opens the scriptures to show them that the suffering was **not a failure, but the plan.**

On the surface, Jesus’ response to the disciples sounds almost too academic—like a professor delivering a dry, technical lecture on ancient prophecy. But as one commentator points out, a well-told story is more than just a data dump; **it’s a window.** It’s a way to look back into the past so we can find the strength to step into the future.³ He reminds them and us today that we are not merely following ancient customs; we are part of a **living hope** that is still blooming.

Think about how flowers bloom in their own time. Here in New York, we see crocuses pushing through the snow, while others wait for the soil to warm up in late Spring. **Faith is like that, too.** Sometimes the stone has already been rolled away, but we’re still standing in the shadows, waiting for our own season to finally begin.

But when the wait feels too long, we stop looking for growth and start looking for an exit. We start walking. And often, we walk in the wrong direction.

It is understandable to head for *Emmaus* when you’re frustrated and disappointed. It is okay to seek a place to hide, to forget it all. But when you do, **be ready to be surprised.** The Risen Christ often meets us on the road of our retreat. And he comes incognito, in the middle of our brokenness, when we least expect it. He meets us in our “Lonesome Town” not to leave us there, but to **correct us, feed us, and set us on the right path—the path that finally leads us home.** Then we will discover that

³ Shannon Michael Pater, “Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2010), 420-422.

hope hasn't really left us. It's been walking with us the whole time. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**