

Luke 24: 13-35

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Hearts on Fire, Eyes Wide Open

When I first moved to San Francisco in 1996 to plant a church, I had a lot of time on my hands. Not a lot of meetings, not a lot of responsibilities — just me, a calling, and a lot of open space on the calendar. So when someone asked me to lead a little seminar for 10 or 15 young professionals on faith and work, I thought, *Perfect! Something to do! I have to knock it out of the park!*

I was nervous. I wanted to make a great first impression. The seminar went fine. Not life-changing, but fine. Afterward, I was chatting with this young guy, trying to make some small talk. I asked him where he was from, and he said he had moved around a lot. I asked why, and he said, "My dad was a professional football player."

Well, now I'm intrigued. "Who'd he play for?" I asked.

"St. Louis," he said. "And later, Dallas."

I leaned in, all friendly and casual, and asked, "What's your dad's name?"

He said, "Eh, you've probably never heard of him."

At this point, a normal, well-adjusted person would smile politely and move on.

I am not that person.

I asked what position he played, and when he said "Tight end,"

Before I could even stop myself, I blurted out:

"Wait! Your dad is Jackie Smith, #81! He's the guy who dropped that touchdown pass that hit him right between the eight and the one in the Super Bowl!"

I swear, the words were just hanging in the air — like that football — and I wanted to reach out, grab them, and shove them back in my mouth. I was thinking, *Dear God, I'm not supposed to be here. I should be back in Knoxville. This is a terrible mistake.*

The guy just stared at me, stone-faced, and said, "Five Pro Bowls. He's in the Hall of Fame. And that's all anybody ever brings up."

Then he turned around and walked out.

And that, friends, is a true story.

I went home and I told my wife, and she just said, “we need to leave.” Kidding. She didn’t say that. She said, “I’m sorry honey, you had no idea who you were talking to.”

I had no idea who I was talking to. And that’s what intrigues all of us about this particular story. Two people who are walking along with Jesus and don’t know who they are talking to.

Two disciples were walking a dusty road, trying to make sense of what just happened. Jesus — the one they followed, the one they hoped would liberate them — has been crucified. And now, rumors of resurrection swirl like fog around their grief.

Apparently, there is a way to miss Jesus when he’s right in front of you.

We Had Hoped...

There may be no sadder phrase in scripture than what the disciples say: “*We had hoped.*”

They had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel.

Wanting Israel’s redemption wasn’t wrong — it was just too small a story. They saw the problem as tribal, local, and political — and needed a Messiah who would crush enemies, not die for them.

For them, the crucifixion was a failure. Maybe they missed Jesus because their vision was too small. Maybe you’ve had those hopes too.

We had hoped the diagnosis would be different.

We had hoped they would come home.

We had hoped the depression would lift.

We had hoped to carry the baby to term.

We had hoped to get a promotion this spring.

We had hoped the church would be a safe place.

We had hoped this nation would do better.

Emmaus is where we go when we think the world ends with crucifixion.

— Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*

Hope is dangerous because it leaves us vulnerable to disappointment. And what you do with all of your “we had hoped” scenarios could be setting the course of your life. It might be blinding you to resurrection in your midst.

Is it possible that you have been so fixated on that missing piece that you feel God slipping away from you? Is it possible that the diagnosis of your challenges, while true and valid, are not in a large enough frame of what God intends for you and all God has made?

I wonder. I wonder how much I've missed God walking alongside me because I was so sure I knew what God needed to do for me, what God was supposed to provide. Maybe I was missing resurrection right in front of my nose.

Hope is complicated, but it's also sacred — because it means we still believe something else is possible.

We had hoped — and maybe we still do. That's the holy tension of Easter.

Faith Walks, It Doesn't Leap

What strikes me is that Jesus doesn't give them a lightning bolt moment of clarity. He just walks with them. Listens. Asks good questions.

And then, he teaches — not to shame them for not understanding, but to help them see that suffering and glory are not opposites.

This is a God who walks alongside us in grief before calling us into joy. Who lets our hearts burn slowly before our eyes are opened. Faith here is not a leap. It's a walk. A long one, sometimes.

Poet Jan Richardson writes:

*Blessed are you who walk on roads you cannot see,
who face the unknown with courage enough to keep moving,
and faith enough to be surprised.*

Maybe that's where some of us are — still walking. Not seeing clearly. But moving anyway.

The Table Is Where It Happens

They still don't get it. Not until they do the most ordinary, sacred thing: They sit at a table. Bread is blessed, broken, and shared. And suddenly — *in that moment of hospitality and communion* — they recognize him.

It wasn't the theological lecture. It wasn't the correct interpretation of scripture. It wasn't even a sermon when Jesus was the preacher! It was the table.

Faith at its best understands this. We don't always reason our way to resurrection. We often *taste and see* it.

Jesus is made known not through certainty, but through relationship. Not in a temple or throne room, but in a shared meal on the side of the road.

Burning Hearts and Open Eyes

Once they recognize him, he vanishes. But notice — *they don't grieve this*. They rejoice.

Because their eyes are now open. And even more importantly, Their hearts were already burning. They just didn't know it yet.

Sometimes we feel something deep within before we can articulate it. That stirring? That nudge? That ache for more love, more justice, more beauty?

That's the Spirit. That's resurrection already burning within us.

Poet Padraig Ó Tuama once wrote:

*It is hard to tell what a flame is,
until it catches something and burns.*

Their hearts were lit before their eyes could see. And maybe ours are too.

The Gospel Is on the Move

The story ends the way resurrection stories often do, not with resolution, but with movement. They get up *that same hour* and run back to Jerusalem. They have a story to tell.

Because that's how resurrection works — it sends us back into the world, back into community, back into our calling to live love boldly and open-eyed.

So What Does This Mean for Us?

- Maybe you're walking a road of disappointment. You're not alone. What will you do with your "we had hoped"?
- Maybe Jesus is walking with you — and you haven't recognized him yet. Could it be that Jesus is loving you through the people around you who are speaking loving truth into your life? Who are picking up the phone when you call? Who take a walk with you to see how you are doing? Who listen over a shared meal?

- Maybe resurrection doesn't look like trumpets and angels. Maybe it looks like a stranger on the road, or a meal with a friend, or your own heart catching fire again.

Look again. Break the bread. Listen to the burn inside.

Christ is not where we expect him to be.

He is risen, but still walking roads. Still breaking bread. Still setting hearts on fire.
And so we go, eyes wide open.

Amen.