

Sermon: Present Tense
Text: Luke 24:13-35
Date: April 30, 2017
Context: WWPC
Third Sunday of Easter
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Luke 24:21

Let's say you've just been resurrected, what's the first thing you would do? Where would you appear? Whom would you be sure to visit right away?

Given the shocking defeat Jesus suffered just three days before this scene, the violent assault that left him dead and sealed in a tomb, you might think he would now head straight back to the capital, right?

He's been humiliated, broken, literally buried.

If this were an ordinary story wouldn't you think he'd want vindication? Wouldn't you?

You guys think you're done with me? You think power and violence have the last word in this story? In my story? In your story? Think again. Because I'm back and I'm fresh from the tomb and you've never seen anything like me before.

But that's just not who Jesus is. He played by different rules before his crucifixion, preferring the towel of a servant to the trappings of power, preferring the reins of a donkey to the cockpit of a chariot for his ride into Jerusalem.

For his whole life he has always opted for the way of peace and non-violence, and evidently resurrection has not changed any of that. Because instead of heading back to the capital to confront the palace elites, to have a not so quiet word with the leaders of the temple, he takes a different tack.

He appears as a stranger, to two other strangers -- two marginal characters we've never met before, traveling back to their little village on some dusty back road.

One on hand, this remote appearance to two men of little consequence is entirely in keeping with the Jesus we've come to know in the preceding pages, the Jesus who privileges the powerless, who loves the people on the margins and gives them pride of place in his ministry and in his story.

That he appears out of nowhere, to two nobodies, on their way to nowhere of any consequence, this is not so surprising. But the story is about to take a turn that is surprising. One that brings it a great deal closer to the lives we know, closer to the lives we live.

When Jesus asks the travelers what they're talking about as they trudge along, Luke tells us that "They stood still, looking sad."

This is exceedingly odd. Let's remember, this is an Easter story. The travelers are not heading back to Emmaus on that terrible Friday when the sky turned black and their Messiah died.

They're heading back on Sunday. *That same day*, the text says. The same day the earth shook and the stone was rolled away. The same day Incarnate Love came busting out of that tomb like a nova being born.

That same day. And yet, they stood still, looking sad.

It's not that their timing was bad. That is, it's not that they left town early, just missing the women who were returning from the tomb joyfully proclaiming news that would change not only their lives, but news that would change the world.

They have heard this news. And still they're walking away, heading home, heading in the wrong direction. Sadness washing over them in waves. Why is this?

Luke does give us some insight into their skepticism, into their sadness.

One of the travelers, Cleopas, has the courage to confess what's really going on: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

Evidently these two pilgrims were caught up in the future tense: *When the Messiah comes he will redeem Israel. Like Moses, he will set God's people free.*

That's the future they want, but that is not the future they get. And so, as Richard Swanson, Professor of Religion at Augustana College has pointed out, they're forced instead to contemplate life in the imperfect tense. *We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped things might be different.*

I think it's a safe bet every one of us here today knows what the imperfect tense feels like.

We had hoped that the pain in our joints was just because we're getting a little older, not because we have a high white count in our blood cells that's going to require treatment that will cause our hair to fall out and our life to change.

We had hoped that our campaigning and our canvassing and our organizing to end racism, to protect our environment, to make our rivers cleaner and our air safer, to make our country more welcoming to strangers and refugees, we had hoped these would succeed, that we could help make America kinder again, but now we're faced with a future no one predicted and that we are not prepared for.

We had hoped that the judge would see the facts of the case differently, would see them the way we do, but now we're faced with the loss of our business, and the loss of the future we had planned for and depended on.

The hard truth is that the imperfect tense -- we had hoped things might be different --this is familiar to all of us, which leads us back to the truth of this story.

Resurrection doesn't come easily, nor does believing in it.

In comic books and movies, superheroes sustain mortal wounds and get right back up. But that's not the story we have. It took Jesus three days and a trip to the tomb to rise again.

These travelers have heard the astounding news of his rising. They are talking about that very thing when he appears among them, yet when he asks what they're discussing, they stood still, looking sad,

Resurrection doesn't come easy. It didn't for Jesus and sometimes it doesn't for those of us who follow him.

A few years ago Cheryl Strayed published a memoir about the journey she took to find hope again after her mother died.

Like the travers in today's story, she had hoped for a different future, one in which cancer did not steal her mother away when Cheryl was but twenty-two, one in which her marriage did not crumble under the weight of the grief she was feeling. One in which she was happy in the present and her future made sense.

But that was not the future she got. Her book, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, documents her effort to come to terms with life in the imperfect tense.

She had hoped for a different future, one in which her mom became a grandmother to Cheryl's children and was always there when Cheryl herself needed comfort and counsel.

She had hoped for that future, and now she was going to go off on a journey to try to come to terms with a different one, with her new, present reality.

The book became an almost overnight sensation, resonating with thousands of readers for as many different reasons as there were readers.

Because they, too, had lost a loved one far too early, and found comfort in Cheryl's story.

Because they, too, had watched as the rock they had built their life upon -- their marriage, their job, their health, their faith -- crumbled far too early and they found hope in Cheryl's story.

If you read her book, or saw the hit movie that followed it a couple years later, then you know Cheryl's story well. And it may have helped you find hope or comfort, or a renewed faith in God or your future.

What you might not know is that before Cheryl Strayed published *Wild*, she was the author of a highly popular online advice column. And you might not know this because the column was not called Dear Cheryl. It was called Dear Sugar.

I shared this story from one of her columns a few years ago. But I think it bears repeating now.

One of her readers wrote to her from her the Pediatric ICU at Egleston Children's Hospital at Emory University in Atlanta. Her six-month-old daughter was found to have a brain tumor and the surgery was scheduled for the next day.

The mom writes: "People have poured all their thoughts and prayers into us right now, but to be honest, God is farthest from my mind. I've never been super religious but now I find myself doubting His existence more than ever. If there were a God, why would he let my little girl have to have possibly life-threatening surgery?" (*Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*, pg. 145. All quotes that follow are from this piece.)

You can hear the imperfect tense right below the surface. We had hoped our baby girl would be a healthy and happy child. We had hoped we'd never find ourselves in the Pediatric ICU, so scared and anxious we're sweating blood.

They had hoped for a care free future, but that's not the future they got.

Cheryl herself confessed that she was reluctant to address this mom's concerns, not because they weren't worthy of a reply--the issues were literally about life and death, and her questions about the existence of God were shared by many of Cheryl's readers.

Rather, she was reluctant for a simpler reason: "I don't know squat about God," she confessed.

Nevertheless she persisted.

Cheryl writes: "It's no surprise you have such doubt in the moment of crisis, sweet pea. It's perfectly natural that you feel angry and scared and betrayed by a God who you want to believe will take mercy on you by protecting those dearest to you.

"When I learned my mom was going to die of cancer at the age of forty-five, I felt the same way. She wanted what she wanted and she expect it to be given to her by a God she didn't believe in."

But again, life didn't work out that way for Cheryl's mom, and it didn't work out that way for Cheryl, either.

Which is in large part why this agnostic advice columnist, shared this observation with another woman who was herself tormented by doubt and anxiety:

“The other half of rising is first being nailed to the cross.”

A truth, I’m confident, every single one of us has, or will, experience at some point.

Cheryl continues: “What you learned as you sat bedside with [your daughter] in the ICU is that your idea of God as a possibly nonexistent spirit man who may or may not hear your prayers and may or may not swoop in to save your [tail] when the going gets rough is a losing prospect.

So it’s up to you to create a better one. A bigger one. Which is, really, almost always, something smaller.

What if you allowed your God to exist in the simple words of compassion others offer to you. What if faith is the way it feels to lay your hand on your daughter’s sacred body.”

That’s a pretty fair description of what happens right here in church. Except our story doesn’t stop there.

Because the story of Easter, and of Christ’s rising, is our story. Even it’s hard to believe, even it comes slowly, even if we find ourselves trapped at times in a dark tomb, we are people who believe in resurrection.

And because of this, our lives are not defined by the imperfect tense. Rather we live squarely in the present tense, believing that even in times of doubt, the risen Christ will come near to us, will join us on our journey, and that we will experience him, not just when our faith is at its peak, when life is easy and we know nothing but joy.

We will experience God’s presence even in our questions, even when life is hard, even when we find ourselves buried by doubt or sorrow or sadness, we too will rise again, because this is our story and we are Easter people.