

## On the Road Again

Sermon 57 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 26, 2020

Luke 24: 13-35

One of the benefits of the stay at home order is that people are out walking all the time. Young people, old people, pets, and babies... all of us are outside walking up and down the road. I would dare to guess that for most families (like my own) the reality of a family walk was somewhat of an unrealistic dream due to the demands of our schedules that kept us away from home and apart from one another most of our waking hours. But now, we can sneak away for 30 minutes after lunch and circle the block a time or two. Then we can do it again between dinner and bedtime. It's an amazing time to talk and connect. To debrief about school and work. To share hopes and fears. And to learn new things together.

For a few years now, Justin and I have felt a little guilty because there was never time for us to teach Mia how to ride her bike without training wheels. She got the bike several Christmases ago; and she'd grown very comfortable slowly putting along with the extra wheels on the back. But the older she got, the more friends she had who were graduating to big-kid bikes. As that happened, Mia began wanting her scooter more... probably so she wasn't the only one riding the baby bike.

Last week, we decided that this period of staying at home was the perfect opportunity to teach Mia how to ride her big-girl bike. We took the training wheels off with unparalleled excitement. We talked about how things would work, lean into the turns, pick up a little momentum to achieve balance, but not too much momentum... that'll end badly. We showed Mia where the breaks were, how to slow down and then put her feet on the ground to stop. It all made sense. We had explained everything and she understood it completely. We walked the bike up the road until we arrived at the cul-de-sac where she could learn on flat ground. Our expectations had never been higher. This was our day. We could feel it. We weren't in a hurry... had nowhere else to be. Mia was confident. This was the day.

After what felt like hours of failed attempts at the cul-de-sac, we decided it was time to return home. Defeated and deflated, we started down the hill toward home. About half way to our house, Mia began asking why we couldn't just put the training wheels back on. Her pleading quickly evolved in to a full-blown melt-down. Through frustrated tears, she sat down on the sidewalk and refused to go any further. She was done. All of the hopes and dreams of speeding down the road on her big kid bike were gone, they'd vanished somewhere between the cul-de-sac and our front door. All that remained were feelings of failure and a deep longing for the way things used to be... you know, when she still had her training wheels on.

Now I know, because I've been talking with other parents, that my daughter isn't the first one to experience frustration with this process. She isn't the first one to catch the hopeful fever of expectation; she isn't the first child to dream about the glory days of two-wheeled freedom. She isn't the first to encounter difficulty along the way. She isn't the first to feel

like a failure. She sure isn't the first to plop down on the sidewalk, and to cry out, longing for the things of the past, when things felt a little more certain.

She isn't the first and she sure won't be the last.

In fact, this experience of hope and despair is one that she might as well get used to because it is bound come around again. Catholic scholar, Joan Chittister believes that this struggle between hope and despair characterizes the human condition. She writes, "There is no one who has not known what it is to lose in the game of life, to feel defeat, to know humiliation, to be left standing naked and alone before the cold and staring eyes of a world that does not grieve for your grief."

Surely that is how the two disciples felt that day, on the road to Emmaus, when the stranger approached them asking, "What are you guys talking about while you walk down this road?"

The question was so obtuse it stopped the two in their tracks. "Are you the only one in all of Jerusalem who does not know?"

For Cleopas and his traveling companion the last week had been the most traumatic of their entire lives. They had traveled this road just days before with hope and expectation about the triumph of Jesus in Jerusalem. They rallied behind him, believing that he would be the Messiah, the one to usher in God's kingdom on earth. Everything they hoped for was wrapped up in the success of Jesus' campaign in Jerusalem. But rather than celebrating in the streets, they hid as the one who was meant to save the entire future of their people was nailed to a cross and buried in a tomb.

"We had hoped," they said, "that he was the one to redeem Israel."

Without the benefit of hindsight, Cleopas and his fellow traveler voice the despair and grief that many of us feel right now as we travel our own roads to wherever.

We had hoped that we might somehow avoid the devastating impact of the Coronavirus, we had hoped that our doctors would solve the puzzle and save us from death, illness, and isolation.

We had hoped that our economy would continue to thrive, like it had been for the last several years. We had hoped to retire with the sense of security that provided.

We had hoped the hiatus from public education would last only a short time.

We had hoped that our struggling relationship would heal and begin to feel whole again.

We had hoped our elderly loved one would pull through.

We had hoped that there wouldn't be so many rainy days.

We had hoped to get a lot more done.

We had hoped the cancer wouldn't return.

We had hoped that things would have been a little easier.

We... had... hoped.

And now here we are. Sitting down on the sidewalk, blinded by our despair and ready to throw in the towel, surrendering to our new humble realities. Things are not as we had hoped.

In the Gospel reading, as the disciples travel the road with the stranger in their midst, they explain the struggles of the Hebrew people, the messianic hopes that had been growing among them and within them for generations. They tell the stories about how Jesus was a mighty prophet in word and deed, how he had shown himself worthy of their faith, worthy of their hopes... he was the one! They said.

Seeing the fullness of their despair, Jesus speaks up, "Oh how foolish you are, and how slow...to believe the words of the prophets!" "Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer?..." Isn't this also what the prophets foretold? Then as they walked, Jesus interpreted the scripture for them, explaining things about himself, even as they couldn't see who he was.

They didn't know it, but everything they had hoped for was right there in front of them, the whole time.

In fact, it wasn't until they sat down for dinner, and shared the bread, that they recognized that the risen Christ, their resurrection hope was present with them the whole time.

Sometimes, like the disciples on the Emmaus road we too are blinded by despair. From our experiences of heart-wrenching disappointment we struggle to see clearly and recognize that new life is bursting forth all around us. Sometimes, like my daughter learning to ride her bike, our fear of failure and frustration with our present reality paralyzes us and keeps us from seeing the path forward. We lose our way and hope becomes a part of the past.

We had hoped...

That day of failed bike riding, I went over and sat down next to my girl on the sidewalk. I listened to her complaints, her reasoning why she needed the training wheels put back on, why things would be better if they could just go back to the way they used to be. We sat there together for a while and talked about how sometimes we just have to keep trying, keep doing the things we know how to do, start out slow, lean into the turns, keep your feet on the pedals, tap on the breaks, and put your feet down when you roll to a stop.

In much the same way, the disciples on their way to Emmaus needed to remember the things they'd learned. The scripture tells us that their hope was in the past tense, too. "They had hoped" ... Luke says, "that he would be the one to redeem Israel." And now that hope was gone. They are stuck in a liminal space between the past when Jesus was teaching them and the future when God's kingdom was realized through the resurrection of the crucified Christ.

And that same liminal space is exactly where we are too... somewhere in the midst of the crisis, caught between the world we once knew and all that is yet to come. The question for us is, have we lost our hope? Is it all in the past tense?

Even if our hope is lost, if it only exists in the past tense, perhaps the road to Emmaus has a promise for us today.

Because even though the disciples seem to have left their hope in the past... hope found them on the road. Hope came to them as they did what they knew how to do: welcomed a stranger, gathered around a dinner table, and broke the bread. Hope in the form of the resurrected Christ, found a way to interrupt their hopeless journey... and hope will do the same for us, meeting us along the way, all we have to do is keep doing what we know how to do – serving our neighbors, loving one another, accepting all that is yet unknown, and trusting God to take care of the rest.

You know, the next day after that epic melt-down on the sidewalk, hope found Mia. Somehow that hope of riding two-wheeled with the big kids captured her spirit and gave her the courage to try again – doing everything she'd learned how to do. And this time, just 24 hours later... she did it! Like magic she got on that bike and started riding. A little wobbly at first, but riding sure enough on two wheels. And it was even better than she'd hoped it would be.

I've never seen her smile so big, a smile that was earned by faith and perseverance, a smile that emerged from her commitment to keep on doing what she knew how to do. Feet on the pedals, eyes on the road, don't get scared just keep on pedaling...

And I've got to believe that as the body of Christ in this world if we just keep on doing what we are called to do – serve our neighbors, love one another, gather around the table and continue to break bread together (in whatever ways we can) - resurrection hope will find us somewhere, along the road. And our new life together will be so much better than anything we ever could have imagined.

Amen.