6-15/16-19 The Power of Hope Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 24:13-35

7 miles. That is the distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus. 7 miles, that on that first Easter morning, felt like 700, as Jesus’ disciples were weighed down by grief, despair and hopelessness. Their beloved teacher had been killed. Jesus, the One they believed was God’s Messiah, had been hung on a cross like a common criminal. Jesus, in whom they had placed all of their hope, now lay in the grave. Dead. Or so they thought.

In sadness, two disciples now sought to get out of Jerusalem. So they began a journey of 7 long miles, seeking to escape all that had occurred that week in Jerusalem.

..Frederick Buechner once asked in a sermon, “Where is your Emmaus?” Where do you go to get away from it all, where is your escape from the realities of life? We all have one.

Is it the mall or the bathtub, the bar or a good book? Is it the TV remote or Facebook?

Where do you go to escape your troubles, your memories, your life?

.. Author C.S. Lewis, after his wife died, once wrote that he thought that his grief might be less if he intentionally avoided the places he and Joy had frequented by limiting his travels to only those places where they had never been together. So he switched grocery stores, tried different restaurants, walked only along streets and paths that he and Joy had never taken.

But it didn’t work. To paraphrase Lewis, “I found out that grief is like the sky above—it is over everything.”

--heavily adapted from Scott Hoezee, Easter 3A, 4-24-17, cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

Consider your own long 7 mile journeys. Maybe it began in grief with the death of a loved one.

Maybe it occurred in the waiting time between medical tests and a diagnosis. Maybe it happened in the hinge time between life’s chapters, that time when one door closes and the next is slow to open. Maybe it arose from the struggle of paying a deductible or an unexpected bill. Maybe your journey was the struggle between doubt and faith, or between independence and surrender to God.

Our Scripture passage today, called by many as the Road to Emmaus, is mostly proclaimed as an Easter season story, another proclamation of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. And so it is a story of good news, where Jesus meets us in the midst of our journeys.

Yet, like that 7-mile journey to Emmaus on Easter morning, many of our journeys begin in uncertainty, pain, despair, darkness, hopelessness, struggle, doubt, death, and fear.

Our 7-mile journeys may be experienced as a detour, a very big bump in the road, or even the end of our journey.

But when fear threatens to overwhelm us, when life shatters all around us, and when the road ahead is unknown, there hope can be born.

..There once was a large city school system that had a program with the city’s hospitals to help children keep up with their school work during their hospital stays. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher.

"We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The program teacher then went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, when she returned, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?"

The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Yet everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

-*Bits & Pieces*, July 1991, sermonillustrations.com:hope

Hope is not formed in us when life is going well. Hope is formed in us when life appears not to make any sense. Hope is what we cling to when life swirls around us. For hope is a confident expectation for tomorrow, no matter what today may look like.

Soren Kierkegaard once described hope as the “passion for what is possible.”

Helen Keller said “Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com:hope

Hope is not wishful thinking.

..Wishing is what you do when you don’t know what will happen. Wishing is wanting a thing or an outcome. But hoping is something completely different. Hoping is believing with anticipation and expectation that your hope will result in a welcome conclusion.

Christian hope keeps us from stewing in anxiety and worry. If we believe that God is good and that God is for us then, despite horrific tragedy, we can find hope in the nature and the promises of God. Hope does not exempt us from suffering, but it reminds us that, regardless of the pain we experience on earth, we have a promise of eternal joy and peace.

 -Jenny Youngman “Hope Against Hope” 6-14-13 ministrymatters.com

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul declares that “We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.” (Rm 8.24-25)

Paul also reminds us that “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Rm 5.5)

The apostle Paul based his hope on the Kingdom of God, and God’s kingdom ways being lived out here on earth. That is why time and again in Paul’s letters we see Paul’s hope as a desire for reconciliation, a desire for obedience to Jesus, a desire the end of division. Paul wanted the church to reflect God here and now and for all eternity.

Our Israelite ancestors constantly lived by hope, trusting in God’s promises to God’s people to be fulfilled. From Abraham and Sarah to the people entering the Promised Land to God’s prophets proclaiming the coming Messiah, God’s people lived by hope in a better tomorrow, grounded in God’s will and God’s ways.

The followers of Jesus had hoped that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the one who would bring the fulfillment of God’s kingdom ways upon our world. Yet when Jesus was crucified then buried in a borrowed tomb, hope gave way to despair. Faith gave way to fear. This wasn’t the way Jesus’ story was to end.

Imagine the conversation between the followers of Jesus as they walked the long 7 miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They reflected on all that had happened in the past few days. They remembered the stories of Jesus, his teachings and his healings, and wondered how everything had gone so wrong.

They walked and talked and grieved, when suddenly a stranger joins them and asks what they are talking about. They stopped, with downcast faces and broken hearts, and wondered if this stranger was the only one not to know that Jesus had been crucified and his tomb three days later found empty. In fairness, not everyone in Jerusalem would have known or cared to know about the death of Jesus. But his followers and disciples were distraught not only about the news of his death but also about the news of an empty tomb. These disciples did not recognize that the stranger was none other than their risen Savior Jesus. So the disciples shared their news and emotions with Jesus, and Jesus listened. Then Jesus shared the scriptures with the disciples, and the disciples listened.

When they all came near to Emmaus, the disciples offered Jewish hospitality to the stranger, compelling him to abide with them a little longer, to stay in their presence and share a meal with them. Jesus agreed.

And while at table, Jesus took bread. Blessed it. Broke it. Gave it to them. And suddenly their eyes were opened. They recognized that Jesus was in their midst, very much alive. Hope was reborn!

These disciples were so filled with hope that they hurried back the way they had come. Yet this time, their journey of 7 miles was much different. Instead of grieving, they were rejoicing. Instead of despairing, they were hopeful. They were sent forth by the Holy Spirit to be hope bringers.

And that is who we are all called to be. Hope bringers. Those who proclaim the good news of God still in our midst, the God who loves us, the God who promises to be with us whatever we face, the God who yearns to transform our hearts, our lives and our ministries.

Ahead of Annual Conference this year, I had several people wonder about the conference theme, “Be Not Afraid: Hope” when they aren’t feeling very hopeful about the future. Fear has caught ahold of many of us, who wonder about the future of the church universal as well as the future of our denomination as well as our own futures.

Yet, during annual conference, we heard story after story after story from those who have been given the power of hope through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

18 year-old twins Alyson and Andrea Hoffman shared their hope witness as they daily deal with Cystic Fibrosis. They know their limited life expectancy, yet do not allow their disease to define them, in spite of daily medications and treatments. They have been active in church, in sports, and will both be attending Ohio Northern University in the fall.

Andrea said, “Hope has taught us to look beyond the present to the life that has been promised in the future. Hope has taught us to live our lives to the fullest each and every day and to focus on our potential – never looking back. Hope has taught us to share our experiences with others and to advocate for the needs of others.”

James Clay is a returning citizen whose life was changed in prison by the Horizon Prison Initiative. Today, he is mentoring a group of men who are themselves incarcerated, works as a spokesperson for the Montgomery County Reentry Office, and credits his new life to the presence of the Holy Spirit and a God who fills him with hope. His hopefulness and renewed passion for life was contagious.

Mandy Fisher was homeless and an alcoholic when she cried out for help on Facebook and her hope arrived in her uncle driving to downtown Detroit in the middle of the night to bring her back to Ohio. She is now active in LifeLine, a United Methodist ministry in Toledo, and through Lifeline has found a community in which to belong, and has also re-found her singing voice, which is a gift from God.

Connie Bannister, after her release from prison, became involved in the Marketplace for All People in Toledo. She cannot work due to a disability, yet enjoys helping people, and praying with people.

 --“Hope Speakers Bring Messages of Resurrection” 6-6-19 westohioumc.org

Tracy Chambers told of how God pulled her back into a life of hope this past year after a period of deep darkness in which her brother disappeared and died and she lost her corporate job after 10 years. She gave thanks for God’s presence even in the pain.

Jayne Lash spoke of an extremely difficult and painful medical journey she has been on for the past two and a half years. Despite losing her ability to do what she loved – to sing and lead worship at her church – Jayne has found other ways to live into her calling, as she and her husband now co-pastor a small congregation. Jayne declared, “I am here today to give hope to those who have no hope.” And that God will send us out in new ways if we are open to giving all of talents over to the Lord.

Keith Wasserman shared his childhood story of growing up a drug addicted Jewish boy in the suburbs of Cleveland who gave his life to Christ in high school then was given in college the gift of naiveté to start a ministry for homeless people in his basement in Athens, Ohio. That basement ministry is now a non-profit called Good Works, which seeks to be a community of hope for rural Appalachia.

Joe Palmer is a middle school teacher as well as a youth leader at Lancaster First UMC, and shared his journey of recognizing his call to teaching. Two young people from his youth group also shared their stories of hope as they seek to discern God’s ways for their lives, and how hope was shown through Joe and others within their community of faith.

-“Laity Session: Live Out Your Call With Hope” 6-3-19 westohioumc.org

If I were to ask you to come forward and share your story of hope, what would you share?

How has God given you the power of hope to bring you through your struggles and hardships, your grief and fear? Who are the men and women God has placed in your path to journey with you on your road to Emmaus?

We all have a story to share. We are all called to be witnesses to hope, and witnesses to God’s presence in our lives.

The power of hope is God’s power at work within us, doing far beyond all that we could ask or imagine, according to Ephesians 3:20.

Hope is that gift from God that continues to pull us forward, onward, expecting, trusting.

The late Eugene Peterson once wrote on hope:

Hoping does not mean doing nothing. It is not fatalistic resignation. It means going about our assigned tasks, confident that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions. It is not compelled to work away at keeping up appearances with a bogus spirituality. It is the opposite of desperate and panicky manipulations, of scurrying and worrying. And hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain.

It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it his way and in his time.

-thepastorsworkshop.com:hope

We are all called to be hope witnesses and hope bringers.

As you travel your roads to Emmaus and back again, give thanks that Jesus meets you on your journey. Give thanks that Jesus walks with you on your journey. Give thanks that Jesus opens your eyes to the power of hope, love and faith within you.

Because of Christ’s love for us, we all have stories of hope to share, stories of faith for this life because of our faith in eternal life. Because of Christ’s love for the world, we together have the power to restore life, to restore dignity, and to create redeemed communities where the principalities and powers no longer dominate.

Tracy Chambers ended her word of hope at the laity session of conference with these words of encouragement, words that apply to all of us, lay and clergy alike:

“Work on, unafraid, renewed, according to our many and varied calls, each within our unique purpose. Work on – being hope and bearing hope – differently from one another and yet together as a people truly united in the love of God…knowing that we, rich in difference, can make a difference.”

-“Laity Session: Live Out Your Call With Hope” 6-3-19 westohioumc.org

You have the power of hope within you! Live it! Share it! Proclaim it! Be transformed by it!

And as now you go forth as hope witnesses to the world around you,

 “May the hope of God fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rm 15:13)

May it be so. Let us pray.