

**Sunday, April 19, 2026**  
**Third Sunday of Easter (Year A)**  
Luke 24.13-35  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“We Had Hoped . . .”**

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!  
*The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!*

While each of the four Gospels contain accounts of the resurrected Christ appearing to his disciples, they all vary slightly in the details—in terms of who is actually present and in the specific circumstances. The one consistent detail across all four Gospels is that on the morning of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. In John’s Gospel, she is alone. In all the others, she is with other woman—exactly which women varies slightly. In three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and John—the Risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene and whoever else is with her. And only after this initial appearance to the Magdalene does the Risen Christ appear to the eleven remaining apostles. Here we must be very intentional in terminology. Jesus had more than just twelve disciples. He had lots and lots of unnamed disciples. Mary Magdalene and various other women were among this broader category of “disciples.” But according to the Gospels, he only had twelve apostles (meaning messengers), the inner circle who were with him throughout his three-year public ministry, who are specifically named in the Gospels. Personally, I would argue that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus should also be included in the list of named apostles, but that is another matter for another time.

With that as background, today’s post-resurrection account from Luke’s Gospel is unlike any other in the Gospels. What we hear today is Luke’s account of the first post-resurrection appearance. Unlike the other Gospels, the Risen Christ does not appear to Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She does go to the tomb, but only encounters an angel, not the Risen Christ. In today’s Gospel, Luke reports a first post-resurrection encounter that varies so significantly from the other Gospels to seem like a completely different story altogether.

In this account, typically referred to as the “Road to Emmaus,” the Risen Christ does not appear at the tomb in Jerusalem nor anywhere else in Jerusalem, as in other accounts on the Day of Resurrection. This account, unique among all the documented post-resurrection encounters, occurs in the middle of nowhere, on a dusty road somewhere between Jerusalem and an obscure village called Emmaus. A place that Biblical scholars do not even know where it was located, other than within a seven-mile radius of Jerusalem. A place that archaeologists have yet to find, if they ever will. A place that was barely known in Jesus’ time, and which is lost to us in our own. And more intriguing than the place of this post-resurrection experience, is who the Risen Christ chooses to first reveal himself to. He does not appear to Mary Magdalene. He does not appear to Peter or any of the other apostles. Rather, he appears to two unknown disciples. Men who obviously were followers of Jesus, although not among the named apostles. In fact, while one is actually named in the account—Cleopas—the other is unnamed. An omission or intentional?

We do not know why Cleopas and his companion were even on that road. Why were they not in Jerusalem with Jesus' other disciples? They have just witnessed the execution of their beloved teacher and leader three days before. The one who they thought would finally make a difference, who would bring about change: "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." "We had hoped . . ." Were they leaving Jerusalem merely because their dreams had been dashed as against a stone? Were they abandoning their faith in the cause, in what Jesus had preached and taught? Seems odd if they were. Particularly since, as they told the stranger they met on the road, "some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive." Surely that astounding revelation was cause for hope: for the possibility that Jesus had been raised as he told them; hope that the movement they had longed for might still have an opportunity to succeed. It just doesn't make sense that they would be so hasty to beat a path out of Jerusalem. And it wasn't like they were high ranking leaders of Jesus' disciples who might be next on the Temple authorities' or the Romans' hit list. Cleopas and his companion were merely faces in the crowd of so many of Jesus' followers. Surely they were not leaving out of fear. There is no indication of that in their conversation with the stranger they met on the road.

"We had hoped . . ." How easy it is to place our hopes in another, in a movement, in a cause. It all sounded so good, so perfect, particularly in the mouth of Jesus. His words of love. His words of hope. His words of assurance. It all sounded so good, so perfect, in what Jesus did. Healing the sick and infirmed. Caring for the poor and marginalized. Working for the Kingdom of God that Jesus said he was going to bring about. "We had hoped . . ." Perhaps they are just trying to get away to regroup, to figure out what to do next. Perhaps they need some time and space to try to process, to try to make sense out of all that had happened over the last three days. To try to figure out what they should—what they would—do next.

"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." In their grief, in their confusion, in their uncertainty, this unknown stranger appears, as if out of thin air, to help them process, to help them make sense out of what had happened. To lay the groundwork for what they would do next. This stranger, asking questions to try to discern where they were with the events that he himself had experienced. Apparently discerning that they were indeed grieving, that they were lost, confused, uncertain, this stranger did what he did in life. "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." He went back to the source, reminding them of what is essential, what is true, with what they needed to reconnect. What they needed to hold on to, if they ever hoped to make sense of what they had witnessed. "We had hoped . . ."

When they reached Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion could have parted ways with this unknown stranger. They could have just as easily gone back to their place of grief, of confusion, of uncertainty, of questioning. To whatever plan they had before this stranger crossed their path. If they even had one to begin with. But no, there was something about this stranger who had walked side-by-side with them these last few hours. This stranger who was so wise. This stranger who touched something within them. Something that had not been touched since . . .

“Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” At least in their grief, their confusion, their uncertainties, they had held on to one of the key lessons they had learned from their now-gone teacher. Hospitality. How many times had they witnessed him caring for others who had no one to care for them? How many times had he shared a meal with strangers? The least they could do would be to do likewise. An apt way to honor his memory.

In the invitation, they were the hosts to this unknown stranger. Yet, he did something unusual. He took upon himself the role of host. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” There was something so familiar in that simple action. An action they would have done so many times themselves. An action that their now-gone teacher had done so many times for them. “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” They recognized him in that one simple act of taking the bread, blessing it, breaking it, and giving it to them. No words, just actions. But those actions spoke volumes. This is my body broken, this is my body given. For you.

With that, the unknown stranger, turned traveling companion, turned teacher, turned friend, turned host of the meal, turned savior . . . with that, he was gone. In that simple action all was revealed. All made sense. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scripture to us?” There was only one thing to do. Despite the late hour, they had to make the long and, at night, the treacherous, return trip to Jerusalem. They had to tell the others. It’s true. What had been reported that morning? It’s true! “We had hoped . . .” And those hopes were not in vain. “We had hoped . . .” And the hope lives on in that unknown stranger who was not a stranger but their friend and their teacher and their Messiah. The hope lives on as they turn around and head back to Jerusalem, to themselves be the ones who are apostles, who are messengers, proclaiming they have seen the Risen Lord. Playing their part. Allowing the story to continue on through their witness and testimony. A witness that extends down through the ages, to us.

In Luke’s telling, the first appearance of the Risen Christ was unlike any recorded in the other Gospels. Accounts in which the Risen Christ appears at the tomb to Mary Magdalene and perhaps some others. Accounts in which the Risen Christ appears to the apostles hiding in some unknown room in Jerusalem. No, in Luke’s account, the Risen Christ does not appear first to important people in important places, but rather to minor figures, ordinary followers of Jesus, on a dusty road leading to a now-forgotten village. A road that, in many ways, symbolizes their lives in the moment. Dry, desolate, forsaken.

It seems that Luke’s account of the Risen Christ first appearing to Cleopas and his unnamed companion is more appropriate for us than any of the other resurrection appearances. More appropriate for where we are, removed these millennia from the first Day of Resurrection. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Luke did not name Cleopas’ companion. Perhaps, that companion is each one of us. Allowing us to enter into the story right where we are in our own time, in our own place, in our own lives. As we travel the dusty road into an unknown future. Perhaps feeling lost, feeling alone. Carrying our own questions, our own uncertainties, our own concerns, our own burdens. Trying to sort things out, to make sense of what has happened to us, what is happening in the world around us. In our uncertainties, confusion, even fear, echoing the words of Cleopas and his companion, “We had hoped . . .” Amid this, a seemingly unknown stranger coming up and journeying with us. In his words reminding us of what is

essential, what is true, of what we need to reconnect with, to get back on track in our own lives of faith. A stranger who, in his actions, shows us the hospitality we need to remember we are loved, we are cared for, we are fed, we are nourished. And most importantly, reminding us we do not travel alone. Causing our hearts to burn within us. Allowing our eyes to be opened to the truth of who this stranger really is, and in the process, being reminded of who we are as those who follow the Risen Christ. As ones who rather than lament, "We had hoped" are now able to proclaim, "We HAVE hope."

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