

“Let it Be”

Rev. David E. Gray
3rd Sunday of Easter
Luke 24: 1-12; Luke 24: 13-35
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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In 1969, the band The Beatles were going through some tough times. The recording sessions were difficult, the members feuded, and there was a sense of loss and doubt about each other. The band was but months from breaking up. The Beatles were working on an album they hoped to call “Get Back,” to signal that they wanted to get back some of their magic. But as they fought among themselves and their work didn’t meet their expectations they became ready to move on. And so they renamed the album, which turned out to be their last original one, “Let it Be,” believing that was a more appropriate statement about where they were collectively in their wanting to leave their problems behind and move on in life.

The desire to let things be and move on is a common human response to problems, particularly when we feel let down or at a loss. Such a desire was central to the characters in our second lesson for this morning. Two weeks ago we celebrated Easter as a time of victory to mirror the joy of Mary and Peter and

many of the disciples at realizing that Jesus had been raised, but in the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel we read of two followers of Jesus who were so discouraged on Easter that they left Jerusalem. What happened to them on their journey can help inform our walk on the road of life. Reading now from God's holy word.

The first three Sundays after Easter we are following the lectionary to address the topics of doubt, skepticism and loneliness, for the early Christians, like us, faced all three in trying to make sense of all that had happened during Holy Week.

Next week we'll talk about loneliness through the metaphor of the Good Shepherd. Last week we spoke about doubting Thomas. He was someone who followed his head. He was an analyzer; he wanted physical, empirical proof before believing that Jesus was alive.

Today we read about two men who followed their hearts, which led them to leave Jerusalem on Easter of all days. Even after Mary and the other women had told them that the tomb was empty, that there was hope that Jesus was alive, Cleopas and his colleague left Jerusalem for a place called Emmaus. The only clues Luke gives us as to why was that they were sad and they said with disappointment, "we had hoped that (Jesus) was the one to redeem Israel." Jesus

had been raised from the dead to redeem Israel and people everywhere, but these two men had a particular expectation of how Jesus would redeem Israel and that did not include dying, despite Jesus' predicting he would be killed. So when Jesus was lifted onto a cross in Jerusalem rather than to a throne they were disappointed, they discounted the news from the women and left for Emmaus.

Biblical historians don't know all that much about Emmaus, where it was exactly or what it was like, other than that it was seven miles from Jerusalem. But Emmaus has taken on metaphorical significance for theologians. Frederick Buechner wrote that Emmaus represents for us wherever we go to escape pain and disappointment. We all have an Emmaus for us. Whether it's a hike, a television show, a book, a trip, wherever we go to escape from our problems and pain.

We don't know much about the reasons why these two men left Jerusalem on Easter. Maybe it was too painful for them to stay in Jerusalem after experiencing the loss of Jesus. Perhaps there were relationships they were escaping from. Could be they needed some space to process their disappointment that Jesus had not fulfilled their expectations to redeem Israel in the manner they hoped. They were disappointed with their loss and wanted to move on.

There is concern in some quarters about the inability of modern Americans to handle loss.

M. Scott Peck's writes in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, that influenced by our culture, television shows and magazines many of us think life lived right should be easy, so we have trouble when life inevitably becomes difficult. We are not prepared for the unexpected and in a culture that tries to ignore death – for the losing which comes with living.

Joel Hoppel agrees. He writes in the cover story of *The Sporting News* magazine this week that modern Americans do not tolerate losing well. Too often winning and winning on our terms is all that seems to matter and anything short of that is unacceptable. Hoppel sums up this “finish first or else” attitude with a New Yorker magazine cartoon of a father telling his little league aged son, “Just remember, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, unless you want Daddy's love.” But if we give up and run from problems we won't have a chance to do better the next time. I think of the conversation from the movie *Chariots of Fire* when sprinter Harold Abrams loses a race for the first time and tells his girlfriend, “If I can't win, I won't run.” To which she responds, “If you don't run, you can't win.”

One message of Luke 24 is that God is a God of second chances. For as fate would have it the two men came upon the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize him and Jesus pretended not to know what had just occurred in Jerusalem. They couldn't believe that this stranger hadn't heard the news of the crucifixion and it wasn't until later that Jesus revealed himself.

This formula is popular in Hollywood, where heroes like Aragon in *Lord of the Rings*, Peter Parker in *Spiderman* or Clark Kent in *Superman* feign ignorance at one point in the narratives only to reveal themselves dramatically later on. Jesus revealed his identity later that evening when the two men invited him to dinner. He took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. You recognize that pattern from Jesus' feeding of the 5000, from the Last Supper and from our communion order. It was in the breaking of the bread that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus.

The resurrection became real to Cleopas and his friend on a second chance - in the experience of sharing a simple meal in a way that the dramatic news they heard in Jerusalem did not. It's a good example of how God tends to reveal himself more often in subtle ways. Not in loud shouts but soft whispers. Not in mighty kings but in humble carpenters. Not by directly confronting us as much as revealing himself over time through scripture, sacraments and the Holy spirit, and sticking with us until we get it.

According to Luke, when they realized Jesus was alive they began to remember that their "hearts had been burning" earlier that day on the road when Jesus was opening up the meaning of the scriptures to them. This passage is a reminder to us that communing with God helps us remember our deeper self. The two men recognized Jesus as he broke bread, but they also recognized something in themselves in that moment. A deeper understanding of grace that compelled them to return to Jerusalem. Without delay they followed their hearts back to face their old colleagues, their relationships, their loss of expectations, their fears, their disappointments – whatever it was they had run from on Easter. And they shared their resurrection story of meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus and breaking bread with the Lord.

Maybe Easter came and went this year and you didn't feel the power and joy of the resurrection. The example of the road to Emmaus shows that we don't only have one chance to experience, celebrate and benefit from the resurrection in one moment a year, we are to experience it whenever we open God's word, or commune with God through the Lord's Supper or worship God prayerfully. That's why there are actually 46 days during the 40 day period of Lent, because each Sunday is to be not a Lenten fasting day, but a feast day. We celebrate the resurrection each Sunday. Each Lord's Day is a mini-Easter.

Ultimately, we can either run away from our problems or face them.

Ask yourself what you are running from? What if you could turn around and face the challenges of your life? The Easter season is a time to face the loss of expectations, the disappointments and the challenges of relationships renewed by the powerful news that Jesus is alive.

News made real to us in word and sacrament and made real over time. I find it encouraging in my moments of doubt that these followers of Jesus in Luke 24 needed some time in order for their hearts to internalize the meaning of the

resurrection. Only then could they return to Jerusalem and share their story of experiencing the risen Christ.

Moving on from problems was what the phrase "Let it Be" meant to the Beatles. But there is another meaning to it. In Hebrew, "let it be" translates as "Amen." Throughout the Hebrew Bible, when people heard something that they believed in or something they hoped God would "let be so," they said "Amen." And of course in our own tradition, "Amen," is the way we conclude prayers to say, "God, let it be so."

God is the source of hope to succeed even when life doesn't meet our expectations. God opens our eyes through the breaking of bread and opens healing in our moments of brokenness. God gives us power to face our disappointments and most challenging relationships with renewed confidence. So this morning as you reflect on God's word in scripture, as you reflect on the meaning of baptism, as we break bread and partake in the Lord's Supper, may these experiences help you realize that Christ is alive for you, and may your experience with the risen Christ become part of the story your life tells.

Let it be so. Amen.