

Year A Easter 3 19th April 2026

Acts 2: 14a & 36-41. 1 Peter 1: 17-23. Luke 24: 13-35

Our Gospel reading this week is Luke's spellbinding tale of Jesus meeting two of his disciples in the afternoon or early evening of Easter Sunday when they were trudging the seven miles back to Emmaus from Jerusalem.

I don't know about you but I hadn't taken on board until this past week that according to Luke this is the first post-resurrection encounter between the risen Jesus and any of his followers. In the three other Gospels, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, but in Luke's version Mary has to make do with just quote unquote a couple of angels.

PAUSE We know of course how the story ends, with the two disciples suddenly realising that the stranger who has explained the real story of the Hebrew Scriptures, and then broken bread with them, is Jesus himself.

With their eyes metaphorically suddenly wide open they understand that He has indeed risen from the dead, that the mad imaginings of the women who had gone to the tomb and told the disbelieving disciples that Jesus was alive weren't mad imaginings at all.

Indeed, according to Mark's Gospel, Cleopas and his companion weren't believed either, while Luke just tells us that the two made it back to the locked room just before Jesus appeared to them all for the first time, but with enough time for the other disciples could tell them they too knew that Jesus had risen.

Because we know how this story pans out, and because we are called to be people of hope, we can be too eager to rush to the end, and skip over the journey itself when the dramatic appearance of Jesus, isn't I think, the point that Luke was getting at.

PAUSE When Jesus met Cleopas and his companion that Easter afternoon their hopes had been shattered. Their hopes for freedom from Roman rule, their hopes that Jesus really was God's long-promised Messiah had all disintegrated on the cross. The hope that is one of the cornerstones of our Christian faith.

They were devastated. But it was more than just the evaporation of their hope that Jesus was the Messiah. **PAUSE** Jesus was their friend, their leader, they were close to him. And what made it worse was its suddenness. A week earlier

he had ridden into Jerusalem in triumph. Now he had died the most horrible of deaths.

But we had hoped....but we had hoped.

PAUSE And that is true for all of us, we have all had our hopes dashed to a greater or lesser extent in our lives, lives cut cruelly short, career dreams dashed, broken relationships, financial hardships to name but a few, leaving us asking what is God up to? Exactly what Cleopas and his companion were asking themselves.

After all, the Jews' understanding of the Messiah was that he would fix the world, starting with Israel. Yet Jesus had died, the Romans were still in charge, the poor still needed good news. We had hoped, we had hoped. As one commentator jokingly put it, If Jesus was the Messiah, he wasn't very good at it.

It was the third day since the crucifixion and the two disciples had heard the rumours and reports that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, but none of the men had seen him.

All this they recounted to Jesus who professed ignorance of what had happened the previous week, presumably so he could get their unvarnished version of events and realise just how much his followers had understood of what he had taught them.

As we know, the answer was very little, which is why they were trudging disconsolately from Jerusalem back to Emmaus.

Frederick Buechner, the American writer and theologian, once said that we all have our Emmaus, that Emmaus is wherever we go or whatever we do to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred, to escape the problems and pain of the world. Emmaus could be a film or a pub; it could be buying something we don't need or mindlessly surfing the internet.

Since no-one has ever been able to identify the exact location of Emmaus, perhaps Luke was being more subtle than we give him credit for.

It's also worth noting I think that Luke doesn't tell us who Cleopas's companion was. Some assume it was another male disciple, others suggest that it was his

wife, but perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps the unnamed companion is us, you or me.

It's probably true to say that most of us, certainly those of us who have reached a certain age, have walked the road to Emmaus at one point or another in our lives, and for many it will have been more than once.

As someone once put it, we learn by looking back but we have to live by looking forwards. So we need to remember that the start of the process of the disciples being able to even get a fleeting glimpse of Jesus later on came after he invited them to name the very hopes that had been dashed.

It is in naming them that we start moving forwards and beyond them to a place where we realise that God has always accompanied us on our particular road to Emmaus, whether it is 7 miles, 70 miles or 700 miles long. And that is what truly matters.

Because God doesn't always give us answers, in fact he often doesn't give us answers. Buechner once wrote that his Christian life was full of unanswerables. "When I confront the unanswerables, I remember that God doesn't give us answers, he gives us Himself."

PAUSE When I was younger there was a popular poem you may well know called Footsteps in the Sand. The last few lines go like this

I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me. The Lord replied, the time when you have seen only one set of footprints is when I carried you.

It is precisely when our hopes have been destroyed and life is at its most difficult that God is closest to us. We may not have the answers, but God has given himself to us.

Just as he did with the two on the road to Emmaus, he walks with us as our faith seeks understanding. Our problem is it's often impossible for us to recognise God's gift at the time.

Why? In the case of Cleopas and his companion, Luke suggests that it was somehow deliberate on God's part - their eyes were kept from recognising him. But equally it may have been that their own expectations – we HAD

hoped – that stopped them from recognising Jesus. And the same may well be true of us.

Jesus fed the 12 and the travellers on the road to Emmaus by Word AND Sacrament and continues to feed us the same way today. Meals play a central part in Luke's Gospel. It's almost as if Jesus was either going to a meal, having a meal, or coming from a meal.

And of course another main Lukan theme is roads and travel. Think of Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem, or the parables of the Good Samaritan and the prodigal son – three stories that only appear in Luke's Gospel. Almost half of Luke's Gospel is taken up with Jesus's journey to Jerusalem – and his death. And of course Jesus meets Paul on the road to Damascus.

Following Jesus is a journey of faith and, as Elijah found, to have the strength to complete that journey requires God to feed us by Word and Sacrament.

PAUSE Let me conclude by giving you just a few Old Testament verses that remind us that just as God does not always give us answers, nevertheless he does always promise to give us Himself. So let us claim for ourselves promises such as these in Deuteronomy 31.

The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

And also in Isaiah 41

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

And finally from Isaiah 43 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you; and when you pass through the
and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

You may well have your own favourite promise verse, but I suspect many will share a common theme. There's no need to be afraid because God has promised he is with us. And that enables us to say with confidence not that we HAD hoped but that we HAVE hope.