

“Beyond Past Tense Hope”
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[Luke 24:13-35](#)

“We **had** hoped.” There are few sadder phrases in the English language. “Past Tense Hope Syndrome,” one pastor calls it.¹ Cleopas and his nameless friend are walking the road to Emmaus, talking, as Luke tells us, “about all these things that had happened.” All these things – there certainly *was* much to discuss, wasn’t there? The disciples had been following Jesus for years. They had pinned their hopes on Him. They believed He was the Messiah. They say “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” They say Jesus “was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.” But it’s all over now. We *had* hoped. He *was* mighty. But now He’s dead and gone and our hopes are dashed on the rocks. Yes, I imagine Cleopas and his nameless friend are recounting story after story. They likely are speaking of “what might have been,” shuffling along, heads drooping, feet barely getting off the ground. What do they do now? Their hopes, dreams, and aspirations are all broken, dashed, destroyed.

We don’t know much about Emmaus. There are competing claims for what might have been Emmaus in the Bible, but it can’t be found on a map. It’s nowhere, really, and that’s where the disciples were heading. Nowhere. They had nowhere to go and nowhere to be, now that Jesus was gone, and so they walked down this lonely road to nowhere. I imagine they just had to get out of town, get away from the memories, get away from where Jesus had been crucified. They went out for a walk down this seven-mile road to Emmaus, talking with each other about their broken dreams, about Past Tense Hope.

It’s all too easy to have Past Tense Hope, isn’t it? On this day we’re celebrating Earth Sunday, but we might think there’s not much to celebrate. According to the World Health Organization, “More than 1 in 4 deaths of children under 5 years of age are attributable to unhealthy environments.”² The World Wildlife Fund tells us “Earth’s population of wild vertebrates — all mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish — declined 58 percent from 1970 to 2012.”³ According to research published in the journal *Science*, “Unprecedented levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, widespread species extinction and deforestation, and high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous in the oceans because of fertilizer use are putting humanity beyond thresholds that scientists say are safe for the continuation of life on Earth.”⁴

¹ <http://westrevision.stewardshipoflife.org/2011/05/addressing-%E2%80%9Cpast-tense-hope%E2%80%9D-syndrome/>

² <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/pollution-child-death/en/>

³ <http://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/blogs/11-startling-stats-about-earths-disappearing-wildlife>

⁴ <https://news.vice.com/article/humans-are-destroying-the-environment-at-a-rate-unprecedented-in-over-10000-years>

Whew. *We had hoped* to continue to live on this planet! In our house, if someone leaves on a light, someone else often says “think about the polar bears,” a reference to the loss of habitat for those lovable polar bears due to melting glaciers with the effects of global climate change. The reality is that we have to think about not just the polar bears, but about all of us humans, as well. These reports and statistics can leave us just as dismayed as the disciples on the road to Emmaus, speaking of Past Tense Hope.

Cleopas and his friend were walking along, kicking the dirt, when suddenly there’s this guy walking with them. And this clueless stranger asks them what they’re talking about. They can’t believe it. They react in anger – “what, are you crazy? Haven’t you heard about Jesus – the one we thought would redeem Israel? Haven’t you heard? They’ve crucified Him.” And, of course, Luke lets us in on the secret of who this clueless stranger is – it’s Jesus and, far from clueless, He is the only one who knows fully what has taken place. And Jesus begins to explain to them what the scriptures said about Him. Luke tells us He starts with Moses and the prophets and works His way through the Hebrew Bible, explaining everything to these disciples. Who could do that but Jesus, but these friends are too despondent to recognize Him. Their dreams are still broken, but at least they no longer walk alone.

Then, when they reach Emmaus, they invite Jesus to eat with them. It is only here, in a setting they’ve encountered so many times – in the breaking of the bread, that they recognized Jesus. They had seen Him take the bread, bless it, break it, and give it to them on countless occasions. There was something about these actions that they recognized and so they then realized who had been with them. It is *then* that they recall how their hearts had been warmed by His presence. They were alone and despondent, and Jesus came to take care of both issues. They are no longer alone, their hearts are warmed, and suddenly, instead of shuffling along down the road to Emmaus, they are running back to Jerusalem to tell the others about seeing the risen Christ. Their hope is no longer in past tense. Their hope is alive and present and they cannot help but share it with others. Easter faith means that, though our hope sometimes seems to be in the past, we need not get stuck in the past. Easter faith tells us that God overcame even death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter faith means that Jesus is walking alongside us, warming our hearts, and stirring us to action.

In January, over 30 faith communities, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), signed on to a letter to the new presidential administration, urging it to prioritize issues of environmental justice, reminding us all that we have a responsibility to “the least of these.” The letter calls on the administration “to support policies that will safeguard God’s creation, address the impacts of climate change on our most vulnerable brothers and sisters, and fulfill our moral obligation to future generations in the United States and internationally.”⁵ The website of Interfaith Power & Light lists statements on the care of the earth from Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Unitarian Universalist faith communities.⁶ So, while we have indeed done great harm to the earth, affecting “the least of these” around the world, hope does not have to be in past tense, as people of faith from around the world are involved in advocating for change. Pope

⁵<http://www.creationjustice.org/blog/religious-community-letter-to-trump-transition-team>

⁶<http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/religious-statements-on-climate-change/>

Francis' second encyclical concerned the earth and calls for "care for our common home." He states "all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start." Easter faith means that hope springs eternal, as people of faith are heeding the scriptural call to Creation care.

Our hope is in Jesus. The disciples had hoped for something that did not come to pass. They hoped that Jesus would be a mighty and victorious leader in this earthly realm. They had hoped that he would overthrow the Roman government and establish a new reign as ruler of Israel. They *had* hoped. Jesus showed them the scriptures and interpreted them in new ways. Their previous hopes were gone, but Jesus showed them how their hopes were fulfilled in Him.

Past Tense Hope. We have it, too, sometimes, and perhaps with good reason. We had hoped to grow old together. We had hoped for that promotion. We had hoped the treatment would work. We had hoped to find a new job. We had hoped to have a better income by now. We had hoped for a child. We had hoped that our family would stay together. We had hoped that things would work out for us, just this once. We have hoped for so many things that did not come to pass in our lives. And the same is true in the life of the church. We had hoped to have a new senior pastor named by now. We had hoped to have more members by now. We had hoped to have been able to meet all of the budget requests. We had hoped to have more volunteers involved in the various ministries of the congregation. And yet, Jesus comes into our midst and tells us that there is always reason for hope. There is always hope in Him.

Will Willimon says this: "If you want to experience the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in your life, where you live, just get up in the morning and put one foot in the front of the other and head down the road. Follow the way. But please, go with a bit of imagination. Walk with the expectation of the possibility of surprise."⁷

The disciples shared a simple meal with Jesus and their eyes were opened with the surprise that Jesus was indeed risen and was right there in their midst. Their hearts were burning inside of them and they knew that they had experienced the Holy. Have you felt that experience of the Holy? Perhaps in the birth of a child, in the love of family, in giving your life to Christ, in the sharing of Holy Communion, in a sunrise, in the flowering of trees and the smell of spring in the air, in the miracle of a butterfly emerging from her cocoon? If we did not know what was to come, we might have hope in past tense in seeing a caterpillar entombed in a cocoon. A butterfly emerging from that cocoon is one of the clearest metaphors for Easter faith. Hope in past tense gives way to hearts burning inside us as the butterfly escapes the cocoon and launches into the air. There is plenty of work to do to in the renewing of creation, but the butterfly shows us the reality of life re-emerging when all seems lost and re-emerging to be even more beautiful than one could have imagined an ugly caterpillar could become. Our risen Lord empowers us for the work ahead, and we trust that, through us meeting our responsibility to creation care, God will renew the beautiful world we have been entrusted.

Past Tense Hope is real. Suffering, disappointments, and broken dreams are real. But just as real is the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who walks the road with us, shouldering our

⁷<https://willwillimon.wordpress.com/2008/04/>

burdens and giving us reason to hope again, to dream again. And, after drudging along toward Emmaus, sometimes we'll find our hearts burning inside after an encounter with the Holy and then run back in the other direction, telling others the good news of salvation – Jesus Christ is risen! Let the earth – and all its inhabitants – be glad! Alleluia. Amen