

Luke 24:13-35
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Take Us Home

The first concert I attended was by John Denver. I can still feel and hear the metal folding chairs on the floor of Municipal Auditorium in Nashville where my family sat to listen to the man whose songs were in heavy rotation on the 8-track player in my family's station wagon. Denver's music was a significant part of the soundtrack of my childhood. I was and still am a kid from the suburbs whose only up-close childhood experience with country roads was the torture of Sunday drives to Franklin, Tennessee (which used to be the boonies), and yet I knew all the lyrics to "Thank God, I'm a Country Boy," "Annie's Song," "Rocky Mountain High," and of course, "Take Me Home, Country Roads." My brother and I can probably still do a lovely duet of any or all of these, perhaps with a few creative tweaks to the lyrics here and there. The appeal of this song is obvious: "Country roads, take me home to the place I belong..." Even if we've never set foot in West Virginia, the lyrics celebrating the comfort of familiar places unchanged by all that swirls around us and breaks our hearts makes it our song, too.

As they walk along on that first Easter evening, Cleopas and his companion could be singing a similar tune. They head home, travelling along a familiar road and leaving Jerusalem behind. Jerusalem has broken their hearts, of course, so they want to go home, back where things are familiar, and try to get over their disappointed hopes. When that stranger comes alongside them and asks what they're discussing, Luke tells us that they stand still and look sad or downcast. Cleopas responds with astonishment at the stranger's question because in their circle, no one can think or talk of anything else. Cleopas goes on to tell his version of the story, a

story of power, promise, betrayal by those in power, hopes dashed, and rumors of resurrection that seem too good to be true. “We had hoped,” Cleopas confesses. The language is past tense, meaning they are no longer in the hoping business. They’re done.

I’m struck by Jesus’ next steps. He does not tell them to buck up. He does not minimize their heartbreak. He does, however, grieve how they and the other disciples have misunderstood what they have witnessed and misunderstood him. He laments that they have been “slow of heart,” reluctant to grasp the ways Jesus’ life, ministry, suffering, and death have been in line with God’s work of redeeming the world. Jesus the Messiah is not bent on bringing back the good old days with a conventional king on a well-worn earthly throne. His reign is not about going back but about moving forward into a world made new. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not yell “ta da”! He does not open their eyes immediately. Instead, he draws them into an intensive bible study where he walks with them through the texts they know well and reinterprets those texts through the lens of all that has happened over the past few days.

Ancient Judaism did not have a long-held expectation that the Messiah would suffer, let alone die. Yes, Isaiah speaks beautifully of a suffering servant, but there are more promises of no more crying on God’s holy mountain, of a king who is strong and victorious over all that runs counter to God’s hope for the entirety creation, and of a world made right once and for all. Even if there were an equal number of texts pointing toward suffering as there are texts that point toward beauty, joy, and healing, isn’t it human nature to hang on to the happy and hopeful ones? Ancient Israel was rightfully nostalgic for the brief shining moment when the kingdom was united and prosperous under King David, even though not all was well or whole, let alone purely holy even then. It is understandable that they—and we—want the happy ending,

whatever we have decided that happy ending should be. And as we noticed last week, on that first Easter evening, crosses still point to the sky and Rome still makes the rules, so it makes sense that Cleopas and the disciples are disappointed, crushed even. They need help understanding the full story, and the risen Christ, exasperated as he may be, matches his pace to theirs as they plod back home as he helps their weary and befuddled hearts catch up.

When they reach their village, Jesus acts as if he is heading on. The Greek makes it clear that he only pretends to be on his way. I have no idea what that looks like, but I do sense that there is a lightness and even playfulness that was missing at the beginning of their time together. It also tells me that Jesus is not finished with them or their hearts just yet. They insist that he come in and share a meal. Cleopas is not one of the big names. And his companion—who some scholars believe may be his wife—isn't even given a name. These two are not headliners or bigwigs, and yet, it is at *their* table in a nowhere town, where Jesus takes bread, gives thanks to God, and breaks the bread. Then and there their eyes are opened, and they get it. He has broken bread before, of course, not only at that last meal in an upper room but at table with pharisees and tax collectors, friends and would-be-betrayers, too. And now, they see him, not in regal robes or on a gilded throne, but at table with them, a couple of regular people sharing a simple meal.

Since Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem all those weeks ago, we have been doing our best to walk alongside him in here and out there. We have heard him preach about lost ones sought out and brought home. We have heard him teach about strangers dropping everything to show mercy to a hurt one that should be an enemy. And we have watched him weep over his beloved Jerusalem whose leaders were trading an easy peace for God's shalom. In the wake of

his crucifixion, Cleopas and his companion walk home, retracing familiar steps convinced that going back home is the only option when their hopes are dashed. On that familiar road and at their unassuming table, God shows them that the story is not over. The walk continues. The risen Christ meets them in their heartbreak and draws them out through scripture and breaking bread. No pyrotechnics. No neon sign. No trumpet blast. No marquee talent. Scripture, companionship, and a meal all shared. And their eyes were opened. The risen Christ in their midst. They hurry to Jerusalem as fast as their legs can carry them, and there they discover that the risen Christ is on the loose, that others have seen him, too. The story is not over. A phenomenal new chapter is unfolding.

Just moments ago we baptized baby Catherine and welcomed her mother Jackie as a new member. We promised to nurture and encourage both of them as we grow in faith together. Thomas and Jackie also promised to “devote [themselves] to the church’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” That question is among those answered by our confirmands and all of our new members of late. And that question is this story in a nutshell, a commitment to walk together as we follow the risen Christ. We promise to question, to study, to pray, and to grow together, and to share in breaking bread not just at this table but out there, too. We break bread when we share cookies and lemonade under the shade in the parking lot, over grape juice and cubes of bread at Taylor Glen and Morningside, over Pub subs and pancakes and cheese straws in Davis Hall, over a hot meal with our unhoused neighbors at the Night Shelter and Love Feast on the Streets, and around picnic tables at the Niblocks’ farm while baby horses and a sweet donkey look on eager for treats. And we are promised that we will catch glimpses of the risen Christ in the midst of being church together as

we follow him. This breaking bread, this promise to eat together is one of the most crucial commitments we make, because the conversations, the fellowship, the tears, the laughter, and the questions are the building blocks of genuine community. This simple practice is faithfully courageous in an era when we are tempted to head back down old roads, tuck back in where we feel safe, and guard our tender hearts. When we dare to promise to sit down and share a meal we commit to slow down, to look others in the eye, to listen, swap stories, and get to know friends and strangers, other siblings in Christ, beloved children of God one and all. This promise to share in the breaking of the bread is not about heading back down well-worn paths or retracing familiar steps. It is not a promise to cling to the hopes we dream up for ourselves. It is not a pledge to fight to reclaim the good old days. No, when we accept the risen Christ's invitation to break bread with others, we risk trusting that we will see and hear him in one another even as we commit to following where *he* leads. By the grace of God, we will walk forward together with our on-the-loose risen Lord into God's unfolding reign, the new creation, the place where we and everyone else belongs.

Lead us on, Lord Christ, take us home. Amen.