My mother was one of the healthiest octogenarians I have ever known. The only time she had ever been in the hospital was to have two babies and she took fewer medications that I do. She lived on her own, traveled the world and lived a full life. I had hoped she would live to her predicted age of 94 and die quickly, painlessly. She had hoped she had many more trips ahead of her and would stay independent to the very end. We had hoped. But then she got cancer. Even though it was an incurable form, she had hoped she would be the one to beat the odds, to live longer than predicted. Even though we had done the reading and seen the statistics, Billy and I had hoped it, too. We had hoped she would have a compassionate and thoughtful oncologist, not the callous one who treated her like numbers on a page, who never once asked her about her feelings or her fears. Billy and I had hoped we would have had Mom longer here in Floyd, that we could take care of her the way she always took care of us. We had hoped. After Mom died last year, I had hoped that all the beautiful memories of her would have dulled the throbbing ache of her loss. I had hoped the mountains of paperwork would not have overwhelmed me. I had hoped that opening a box and seeing her things would not be so painful. I had hoped. She had hoped. We had hoped.

Aren't those some of the most painful, wistful words anyone can utter? They reflect the pain of loss, of disappointment, of failure, of loneliness, of grief. We have all suffered that deep, searing anguish of life not turning out the way we had dreamed, prayed or planned. But we had hoped. Very often, those words are followed by a one-word question: “Why?” Why, with all the technology available to us, can we not find cures for diseases that take our loved ones away from us? Why do loving, supportive relationships fail? Why do those who are supposed to lead nations instead bomb and poison and starve their people to death? Why do those who profess to follow God persist in oppressing God's children? Why do those things which so many of us have been taught will bring us happiness – money, power, status – leave us feeling empty and unfulfilled if and when we get them?

But we had hoped. Why do bad things keep happening? Cleopas and his friend were leaving the disappointment of Jerusalem behind on that Resurrection Day. Out of their mouths poured words of disbelief and defeat, mixed with anger at the one they thought had come to change everything. “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel, to straighten out this cruel and unfair world, to set us free from all the pain and disappointment.” The most literal translation of the men's exchange on the road was that the two were “throwing words at each other.” Isn't that the way things often go, that our disappointment and anger over our dashed hopes carries over into our relationships with one another? Cleopas and his companion were struggling to come to grips with events which were totally out of their control and which led them to conclude that their world made no sense at all. So sure were the two men that everyone in Jerusalem and around it were devastated by what had happened there just three days before, they were shocked that the stranger who joined them on the road didn't seem to grasp the severity of the situation. So sure were they of the finality of Jesus' death, the men kept on the path they had chosen, each step taking them further and further from Jerusalem and from the amazing news of the empty tomb. On they walked, with their backs to the light that had dawned. How large their shadows must have appeared in front of them, shadows of their own ignorance cast on the road ahead. As much as we want to label the men fools and tell them to turn around and face the truth, we understand, don't we, why they didn't. Despair is a powerful force that can lead us on hopeless paths. Yet Jesus was not going to let the men go. He saw to it that Cleopas and his companion were able to share their grief with a stranger. “But we had hoped...” Jesus reviewed the prophesies of scripture with the men, going back all the way to Moses and pulling the connection forward to himself. The men still didn't see it, but they weren't rude. Their manners kicked in so that when it looked like Jesus was goinng to continue on the road, Cleopas and the other invited him to stay with them in Emmaus, to share a meal and get some rest.

Finally, at the table, in the breaking of bread, the stranger became the host and was revealed to be the most intimate of companions. Ordinary blessing over ordinary bread and wine. That is how the risen Christ cleared the clouds from the eyes of his friends. That is how they knew the great news of resurrection, the news they shared as quickly as they heard it, the news that would change their lives forever. The distraught men were moved from disappointment to a glimmer of hope to full-blown joy. Such is the movement of resurrection. Today, in this very room, we are the recipients of grace as God delights in clearing our blurry vision. In the breaking of bread, in the sharing of a cup, Jesus reveals himself to us and we are given food for our souls. Ordinary blessings over ordinary bread. The genius of it all could only come from the wide-open heart of God.

But we cannot stand at the empty tomb nor at the table of the Lord forever, for we are dealing with a Savior on the go. Listen again to the words which come just before and just after Jesus made himself known to the two at Emmaus: “He walked ahead as if he were going on,” and “he vanished from their sight.” The risen Christ knows well that this world is full of confused and despairing people and their wishful chorus: “But we had hoped...” so he is always on the lookout for new opportunities for revelation. Maybe the only way to keep him in sight is to be ready to change direction at any time. Cleopas and his friend got up from the table, their desination totally reversed from where *they* started. They hurried back to Jerusalem, found Jesus' disciples gathered together and told them that Jesus had opened their eyes and hearts when he broke bread with them.

Our path returns us over and over again to the place where Jesus breaks bread with us and then takes us out to share this bread with others. This cruel and imperfect world will continue to hurt and disappoint us. But when our feet are grimy and dusty and the road ahead of us looks endlessly bleak, we will turn and find someone is walking with us, someone who has gone this way before and will find a way to fill our journey with resurrection hope. Someone who promises to see us safely home.

Amen.

*Easter 3A*

*April 30, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 24:13-35*