

Luke 24:13–35 (NRSV)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

A Jewel Unexpected Found

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 10, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 24:13–35

I have always had a terrible time buying cards. I especially had a hard time buying Mother's Day cards for my mother.

One would not think this should be so. After all, Hallmark tries to make the job easy. The card giant puts forth every effort to make it simple. It assigns its best and brightest to the job. Like Santa's elves, one imagines they struggle all year to be ready for this day. And sure enough, by the first week in May, sympathy cards, birthday, get-well, and happy anniversary cards are all squeezed into a tiny out of the way section, replaced with a cascade mother's day cards, sporting glossy flowers, or soft focused brides, or nostalgic caricatures of nineteenth-century mothers pulling bread loaves out of the oven. And Hallmark's writers look to help us find the perfect words to express our love, too. Sing-song verse says, roses are red, but violets come latest; thanks, mom, for my childhood; it was the greatest.

And I would stand in front of the rack, helpless before messages that recalled only the sunny days, and the endless smiles – a growing up in which neither mother nor son experienced pain or sadness or hurt.

Is it not human nature to want to believe it is so, that mothering was easy, that growing up was easy, that it was all sweetness and light? Sure it is.

We are in good company, actually. You may remember that Jesus' disciples also counted on just such a relationship with their God. They looked forward to the messiah. They imagined that God would act in a certain and convincing way to overthrow the subjugation to Rome, that God would unambiguously deliver them from bondage and give them milk and honey as before in the Exodus. And they were sure that Jesus was to be the redeemer, the one to do the job.

Indeed whenever Jesus on those many occasions tried to tell them that it was not so simple, that even he, that especially he would not escape the forces against them, they would not hear it. They said, surely you will not suffer, you will not be killed, and they rode into Jerusalem humming Hallmark verses as they went.

*** Do not misunderstand me. I do not resist the celebration of the love between mother and child that this day seeks to find. But I am wary of the greeting card view. Just as Jesus' disciples kept their eyes from the truth about who Jesus was, I wonder if this syrupy sweet notion of Mother's Day finally prevents more love than it expresses.

On the surface it is wonderful. It seems safe. It expresses only the most positive and affirming of thoughts. But I wonder, does it not finally exact its own sort of perverse judgment? Does it not suggest that as children, or as parents, family life should always have been uncomplicated, blissful, without fatigue or tears? Does it not invite us to sweep the rest under the rug? Does it not imply in subtle, or maybe not so subtle ways that to admit any anguish is to admit failure, to be disapproved of by the sentimental verses on the Hallmark card?

And, yet, whose real memories are truly and completely captured by the verse writers from Hallmark?

*** one day when I was thirteen years old or so, the beginning of those years when neither parent nor child can do very much right, I rebelled against my mother's unwarranted strictness. Her remembrance, was equally clear; she would say that I would not listen to reason or accept discipline. As you can understand, we did not see eye to eye on this. And so one day I announced to her with as much anger as I could muster, "I might As well live in Russia for all the freedom I get in this house."

Now, over the years we both remembered this incident. Sometimes we even spoke of it with embarrassed laughter -- laughter because it was funny, embarrassed because it still hurt a little and because the Hallmark version of family life made us ashamed at the incident. There are no cards that say, roses are red, violets are blue, do you remember, mom, the day I yelled at you? And there are no cards that recall many of the other memories either -- a woman too tired, with too many children, standing in a hopeless pile of laundry at the bottom of the cellar stairs with tears streaming down her face wishing for all the world that she was six years old again. No cards that recall her despair or her seven-year-old son's bafflement because her wish to be six years old again could only mean that he wouldn't be there, so he must be a part of her problem, too.

*** Good friends, in the very best of human relationships there is trouble, there is disappointment, there is hurt. And yet how uncomfortable it makes us to admit it. We want so much to believe that the Hallmark card captures the whole of the truth.

*** We are not the first people to feel that way. Neither, probably, were Jesus' disciples. But they, like we, had a romantic ideal in their minds. In their case, snippets of their Scriptures formed the basis for it. "He will be great, and will be called son of the most high; and the Lord God will give him to the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." To them that meant quite simply and completely that the messiah would usher in a utopia where god's chosen people would face struggle or disappointment or loss no more.

They wanted so much to believe it, this utopia. They wanted so much to believe it that they could not hear Jesus' own cautions that it would not be as simple as that. They wanted so much to believe it that they could not discern the ugly undercurrents even as they came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They wanted so much to believe it that one of them sold him to the authorities, probably not for the money, but because he concluded that Jesus was a fraud. They wanted so much to believe it that one of them, stating far more truth than he ever intended, said, "I do not know the man" three times and then the cock crowed. They wanted so much to believe it that when he died on the cross, they simply left, beaten and disappointed because he was not the one they had expected, the one to fulfill the romantic dream.

But then, at this low point, the Gospel writer gives us a beautiful, an eloquent irony. Two disciples are walking down the road, away from their heartbreak. It is Easter morning, but to them the morning is all sorrow and darkness. And as they walk, they are joined by another, the risen Christ. But they do not recognize him. And for the first time they articulate the full depth their despair out loud. To this stranger they say, "We were hoping that he would be the one to deliver Israel." We were hoping that he would be the one to deliver Israel, but he was not. We were hoping that he would be the one to deliver Israel, but we were wrong. We thought that God would act for us. But our God failed us.

In the disciple's view the only way for God to succeed was for God to fulfill their hope for paradise on earth. There was only one scenario that they would accept from God. They fully expected a life of unhindered gladness brought on by god's swift justice, which would overtake

their enemies and leave them on top of the world, happy and in control. Nothing else would count. They would consider anything else a failure.

And as they spoke to the risen Christ, they were coming to grips with the fact that their hopes would go unfulfilled, and the words must have come hard.

*** Hallmark, too, holds up its version, or our version of never-never land. In it family relationships have no problems. There is never any lack of affection. There is no alcoholism, no drug abuse, no teen pregnancies, no anger, no betrayal, no mistakes, no regrets. And according to this view, anything less is a failure.

And so these things are rarely spoken of. And when they are, it is often in quiet whispers, as if saying them softly will make them less real. For they judge us too harshly. Better to pretend that life is all as Hallmark would have it.

*** But an interesting thing happened to the disciples. They did speak. Perhaps they had reached bottom, and denial had become impossible. Whatever it was, as they walked with one another, and then with this stranger who joined them, they spoke of their troubles, of their disappointment, of their wishes unfulfilled. They expressed it all in those few words, "We were hoping that he would be the one to deliver Israel."

They walked and talked, facing a reality that a mere three days before they couldn't even imagine. And as they came to the village, they intended to stop, for night had come upon them. Jesus, whom they still did not know, pretended to be going on, but they asked him if he would stay. He did, and, one imagines, the conversation continued. Finally, they shared a meal together.

Then the most unexpected thing happened. Slowly they began to recognize that it was Jesus himself with whom they were conversing and eating.

Later, reflecting on that day, they said, "Were not our hearts on fire within us, as he was speaking to us on the road and as he opened to us the sense of the scriptures?"

*** For Luke, the most important things throughout the whole Gospel happen on the road. It is striking that every important teaching, every important encounter that the Gospel writer records starts with the words, "As they were on the way. . ." or words to that effect. This is no accident or odd quirk in the Gospel writer's literary style. It is meant to convey that the things of importance happen in the real, often apparently ordinary encounter with living, which Luke symbolizes with the words, "As they were on the way."

The disciples had grand ideas about how God would act on their behalf. They held expectations couched in Biblical prophecy. And while they were caught up in that, the Hallmark version of things, the real Christ was hidden from them. But when they were on the way, when they were living life, when their expectations were dashed, when they finally confronted their sorrow and disappointment, and when they walked down the road talking to each other about their real lives and their real hurts, the most unexpected thing happened. Their hearts burned in the presence of the risen Christ as they went. When they thought that their conversation was about defeat and failure, for the first time they began to understand the nature of all relationship - that it is complex, that it is not easy, that it is disappointing, even if that relationship is with their God. But most important, they began to realize that it is in the midst of this, on the way, in real life relationships, not some fantasy found in a greeting card, that the risen Christ, true love, searches us out.

*** When my mother was still alive, I would stand in front of the card rack the week before Mother's Day, and nothing Hallmark had written would go far enough. Yes, to be sure, I remembered my mother's smiles, the wonderful times, and still treasure my memory of them more than I can say, and I long for them now. But I also yearn for the deeper conversations we

had at least a few times. I imagine saying, I love you, Mother, not only for what was easy for us, but for the hard times as well. I imagine saying that it was in the struggle of our life together, where there were tears and grief, in the times that we were a disappointment to each other, where life was hard on us and we on each other, I imagine saying that it was on the way, as Luke would say it, that the stronger love I have for you has come. I imagine saying that it was truly in those places where Hallmark would say there is nothing to celebrate that I found the unexpected jewel, the love that is embedded in real human connection. In yearning to say even just this much does my heart burn with love that is true and real. Amen.