

On this third Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves traveling a road that’s uncomfortably familiar. Every one of us, regardless of identity or circumstance, knows this road. We’ve walked it. We’ve lost our way on it. We’ve left it behind and then returned to it. The road is the road to Emmaus, and we recognize it by the words we speak when our feet hit its rough and winding way one more time: “But we had hoped.” These words we speak on the road to Emmaus are words of pain, disappointment, bewilderment, and yearning. They are the words we say when we’ve come to the end of our hopes — when our expectations have been dashed, our cherished dreams are dead, and there’s nothing left to do but leave, defeated and done. But we had hoped.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is dead and those who follow him are so distraught they utter those desperate words, “We had hoped . . .” But when they encounter the living Christ, they do not recognize him until they invite him into their home and Jesus breaks bread with them. What does it mean to realize that in all the years that have passed since that day, with all of the archeology and exploration that has taken place in that region, no one has ever found the location of the village called Emmaus, even though it was only “seven miles” from Jerusalem? Perhaps Emmaus is the place you go when you need to find hope. Maybe in these desperate, confusing, and uncertain times, walking the road to Emmaus is exactly the road we need to be traveling.

As Luke tells us, we know the third person they meet along the way to Emmaus is Jesus. We know it, but they do not. When Jesus questions them, they are confused about how anyone who has been in Jerusalem for any amount of time would not know what they are talking about. How could anyone have missed all the things that had recently happened to Jesus of Nazareth?

Confusion plays a major part in the disciples’ story. Up until Jesus’ crucifixion, they remain unclear on what will happen. At his crucifixion, they scatter in fear. These two on the road to Emmaus express their sadness, thinking that the crucifixion meant Jesus was not the

Messiah for whom they had waited. They are all the more confused by the fact that the women who went to Jesus’ tomb found it empty. They have heard that some angels say he was alive, but they have not yet considered that this means resurrection and the fulfillment of God’s plan.

Today we know the Easter story. Today we know Jesus is resurrected from the grave, but as it was for those disciples who encountered a stranger on the road to Emmaus, so it is still sometimes just as hard for us to recognize the living Christ as he walks along with us. We too find ourselves doubting Easter and its importance asking, “if Easter is true, if the resurrection really happened, so what now? What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to live?”

Here, in the aftermath of the resurrection, we are still trying to figure out the world now that Jesus Christ has been risen from the dead. If Easter is true, if indeed the crucified Jesus has been miraculously raised from the dead and vindicated as the Messiah, how then should we live? If this central affirmation of the Christian faith is true—that the once-dead Jesus has been raised into eternal life, that Jesus’s way has been vindicated and affirmed by God as God’s way—then we must adjust our lives accordingly. Easter is a revelation of who God really is and what God really wants out of us and the world. If Easter is true, then God is the one who raised crucified Jesus from the dead.

In his earthly ministry Jesus called people to active discipleship, to put into practice their beliefs. Today’s lesson stresses that the risen Christ is the same as the crucified Jesus. The challenges that Jesus places before us are intensified, given new life by the resurrected One. One of the reasons why we read and interpret scripture is to link us with our tradition, to be instructed by the saints of the past. And yet, in the light of Easter, a major reason why we do business with God’s word, scripture, is that we truly believe that God speaks to us through the reading and interpreting of scripture, here and now.

We believe that Easter is true.

In seminary I recall reading a theologian who said that one reason why people find it difficult to believe in Easter, to have faith that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, is that if the resurrection is true, then their lives would have to change. They would be living in a whole new world and would have to adjust their lives accordingly, if Easter is true.

Christians believe that Easter is true. We believe that God, in an amazing act of divine vindication, raised crucified Jesus from the dead. In so doing God ultimately acted in the world. God revealed who God really is and what God is really up to in the world. God the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the one who wins victories through suffering, who lifts up the downtrodden and the oppressed, who will not allow the victims of evil and injustice ultimately to be crushed. In the end, no matter what evil is done, God will get God’s way with the world.

Easter is true.

And if Easter is true, as we believe it to be, how then should we live? That is the question before us this Third Sunday of Easter.

If Easter is true, it’s a whole new world in which those who were once, in their sin, far from God, are brought near, gifted with the Holy Spirit, promised a share in God’s reign. Easter is an invitation to exchange citizenship and join up in that new reign.

A couple of Sundays ago, when pastors proclaimed to church communities online that, “Jesus Christ is risen, he has risen indeed!” the hope is that you responded with “Alleluia,” with songs of affirming praise, and that’s right, Amen! But if Easter is true, then it’s also appropriate to ask, “What should we now do?” now that Easter is true, and Amen has been said.

Paul tells us we should love each other deeply from the heart. You have been born anew. It’s like the resurrection of Jesus is new birth for all of us old, dying sinners, so that we are made

into different kinds of people who are able now to love each other “from the heart,” if Easter is true.

In today's Gospel we find this wonderful story of the walk to Emmaus. They didn't know the stranger who walked with them on the road, who opened the scriptures to them? The women had run back from the cemetery, saying that Jesus had been raised, but they did not believe the testimony of the women. That is, they didn't know that Easter was true. Then, at the table that evening, when Jesus broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they saw the Lord. They ran all the way back to Jerusalem saying, “the Lord really has risen!” (Luke 24: 34). Easter is true.

They thought that the Jesus movement had ended; it was just beginning. They thought that night was coming when it was really the dawn of a new day. Easter is true.

Easter is true. Of course, that's what Christians believe. But if Easter is true, how then should we live? If Easter is true, then it means that Jesus Christ is not just a wonderful teacher, an inspiring person, a notable historical figure. Jesus Christ is none other than the full revelation of God. He is Messiah. He is Lord. Now, we know who God is, what God looks like, what God wills for us and the world, if Easter is true.

If Easter is true, then never again are we permitted to lose heart, to despair, to give up. If God transformed the evil, bloody crucifixion into a grand triumph, well, who knows what God can do with our setbacks, dead ends, failures, and frustrations? With our time in exile? With our days tomorrow in quarantine? With the future of the current Covid-19 pandemic? No place is beyond the reach of God's redeeming grace, if Easter is true.

If Easter is true, then it's a lie that death is the last word, the final act, the end. If Easter is true, then it isn't over until God says it's over.

If Easter is true, then our end is really our beginning. At the end, when this life is over, we are given not oblivion, darkness, and despair but a future, a new birth, a new beginning, if Easter is true. If Easter is true, then we are not left alone. The risen Christ came back to the very disciples who disappointed and betrayed him. The risen Christ gathered these depressed, despairing, and bereft individuals and formed them into a new family, a community, the church. We—who are taught by our culture to think of ourselves as competitive, lonely, contentious individuals, each looking after ourselves, each seeking our own self-interest—are the church, Christ’s body, the visible presence of the risen Christ in the world, if Easter is true.

If Easter is true, then you don’t have to climb up to God, and you don’t have to think hard and go through all sorts of mental gymnastics in order to be close to God. In bread and wine, God comes close to you. In the opening of the Word, God’s Son is revealed to you and in you. If Easter is true, then dare I say it, you don’t even need to come to church. You come here to the church, grab a copy of this sermon, wake up on Sunday morning, click on a video link to hear this sermon thinking that you are coming to receive God only to be surprised that, in worship with fellow Christians around the world on this day, in the Lord’s body and blood, in the singing and scripture reading, maybe even in the sermon, the resurrected, living Christ is reaching out to you, if Easter is true.

If Easter is true, then we should live as we pray the Lord’s Prayer each Sunday. When we pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” then we will want to work to arrange the world to resemble as closely that world in which we fully expect to inhabit in eternity. We want the world here, today, to look very much like the world we long to inhabit for an inestimably long period of time. Our final destiny, the goal of it all, where our world is heading, is included

in a word, heaven. Eternity, according to John’s Gospel, and maybe the other Gospels as well, begins now. Or as Catherine of Sienna put it, “all the way to heaven is heaven.”

But Easter is more than simply “Jesus has been raised from the dead, so now we will get to see our loved ones when we die.” Easter is about a whole new world, not someday, but today. Not somewhere in eternity, but now. Of course, that whole new world is not completely here, not in its fullness. But it is sure on the way. It is the vision of Easter, the vision that is the most powerful motivation for Christian action in this world. We know a secret about the world and the direction in which the world is moving—Jesus Christ is risen! He has risen indeed.

Easter is true! How then should we live today? Right now?