May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer

From despair to hope Luke 24: 13-35

Thank goodness, there is such a thing as hope. According to Emily Dickinson, it is "the thing with feathers that perches in the soul….." Thank God, most of us have known hope in our lives. Having hope means that the good things you wish for are possible and that you have some confidence……maybe even an expectation that your wishes will come true. My prayer is that hope is the thing that lifts you up today.

But things happen that can dash your hope, or even completely snuff out the energy we derive from having good expectations. For a variety of reasons folks sometimes find themselves without hope. The dreams that had always sustained them can be quenched in an instant. It might be the diagnosis of a terminal illness for yourself or someone you love. Perhaps some events or circumstances have reduced the financial nest egg that has given you confidence in your future. Maybe you're facing bankruptcy or homelessness. A housefire can turn your world on its head. Breakdowns of relationships can often lead to a devastating separation from any real sense of joy.

Lots of things can affect our well-being. Losing hope is a huge threat. Lack of hope is the very definition of despair, and despair can be a very dark place, indeed.

On the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend are sad and confused. They are sad because their hope died on the cross and was buried in a tomb. They are confused because they have heard reports that the tomb was found empty by the women who went there, and that there were angels telling them that Jesus was alive, although no one had seen him yet. We can only imagine what their conversation was like as they walked back home that day. They were sad and confused and worried. They had hung their hats on Jesus' promises. For the first time in a very long time, they had known real hope. Now it was gone. These two buddies are gripped by something that looks like despair.

So, they were walking along, chatting and commiserating about their lot. They thought they had a plan. The future for them was tied to their Lord, who has been taken from them. Now, there is nothing to be happy about.

As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself joined them, but they didn't recognize him. And what did Jesus do? The first thing he did was listen. He asked them a simple question," what were you talking about?" Of course, Jesus knew what they were discussing, but he wanted to hear it from them.

Jesus wants to hear what's happening with all of us, in our own words. That's just how it happens. Jesus is walking with us through our lives, whether we recognize him or not. Jesus just comes walking up next to us and invites us to tell him about our troubles.

It is a teaching moment as well. He is teaching us how to share our faith with others. He is showing us that it all starts by joining someone on their journey. Walking with them. Talking with them. Listening to them. It might mean opening ourselves to someone else's pain. Jesus is teaching us that being with someone and caring for them is the first step in demonstrating our faith; ministering as a disciple. Sometimes we want to skip this step, because it can be hard. It can be uncomfortable. You can only share your faith by first being present with someone and then listening.

Several years ago, I was asked to visit with a family who had just lost one of their own to suicide. I was called because this family was not affiliated with any faith community, so they didn't have someone they might turn to naturally, someone they would call "their priest" or "their Pastor." It was a frigid winter night when I made my way to their home. All the way, I was feeling doubts about my being the right person to help them plan for a memorial service. Planning the funeral, you see, could not be the first thing I'd do. First, I had to listen. I worried about my ability to be present for them. I was a stranger to them, after all, and I had never been in this position.

I was meeting with the mother and sisters of the man who had died. They greeted me warmly and invited me to sit with them. I asked them simply to "tell me about your son; tell me about your brother." Over the next two hours, these three women shared about their love for this person who had been both a light in their lives and a concern. So much about his life had been troubling for them and a source of worry. This intense and emotional sharing was a good and therapeutic exercise for them. Only after that could we get down to the earthly business of how we would remember him.

Just as Jesus walked up beside Cleopas and his friend to help them with their fears, he appeared in my life at just the right time, to give me the confidence and the guidance to do something that was hard and was ever so important. It starts with being present, as Jesus always is for us.

Back on the road to Emmaus, after Jesus listened to Cleopas and his friend, he interpreted what the Bible had to say about his death and resurrection. He wanted them to see how their story was wrapped up and inseparable from God's story. He helped them understand how Jesus' crucifixion was necessary; that everything he had done in his life and his suffering was done out of love for us. And it was all necessary to bring forgiveness, healing and hope to our sad, broken and sin-filled world. Luke says in his Gospel that their hearts "burned within them" with everything they had learned from Jesus.

Jesus didn't do what he did because the two guys on the road cried out for help. Jesus didn't wait to be invited to advise them or soothe their troubled minds. He quietly, gently stepped into their day and transformed them. He was present to them and he listened.

A few years ago, a friend asked if he could chat with me about something that was troubling him. One of his long-time friends was very ill and didn't have much time to live. His concern was about his own discomfort about the prospect of seeing his friend in the process of dying. His experiences with him had always been joyful and fulfilling; working and enjoying time together. Seeing him as he is now would be depressing. He needed help to take the next step. His anxiety and apprehension were entirely understandable. He was experiencing a kind of despair. His discomfort may have been complicated because the situation made him think about his own mortality. He was sad and confused, not unlike Cleopas and his friend.

We talked about how valuable our time is, not simply because it is limited and we really should use it wisely, but because it is the most precious thing we have to offer each other. Reaching out to someone who is experiencing despair, just to listen perhaps, is the very best thing we can do. You don't have to bring a cure for the problem at hand, or even offer sage advice about how to cope. Your task, at least in the beginning, is just to show up and to listen. For a dying person, that may be quite enough. Being present to share time during someone's last days is

an amazing experience and it is comforting for good friends. Both of them. It is not an onerous duty, it is a privilege, always to be treasured.

I'm sad to report that my friend waited to be "ready" before making the long drive to visit with his dying friend. Maybe "ready" meant getting free of anxiety and mustering some sort of courage to face an uncomfortable situation. When he finally made his way to be with him, he was too late. A different kind of sadness comes from missing such an opportunity. It was an opportunity for the special kind of joy that could have come, even as one's life is winding down. It was an opportunity for a couple of guys who have been part of each other's stories to spend a little time together as one of those stories was coming to an end. These are moments we can't get back.

Many of us have learned of someone's passing and feel some regret at not visiting more often, not being more present for them. "Too busy, we say," and "I have my own issues, you know." We offer these excuses to ourselves to soften the regret we feel. But we don't get a do-over. It feels bad. We resist our instinct to scold and instead want to offer some comfort to dispel that sadness that someone may feel when that happens. "You did all you could," we say. "Trust that the person knows how you feel."

When the two disciples on the road to Emmaus failed to understand that everything that had happened was the fulfillment of prophesy and actually was a display of God's love for us, Jesus did not offer them a pat on the back and a gesture of love. No, he rebuked them for their lack of faith. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe." He wants us to see with the eyes of God. Sometimes, when we look at our lives through the lens of eternity we realize our shortcomings. Maybe we need to hear from our Lord, or from a friend, a word of rebuke once in a while.

But Jesus continues his journey with Cleopas and his friend (and with us) to Emmaus. They invite him to stay, even though they have not recognized him yet. They sat together to share a simple meal, which became holy when Jesus blessed the bread and broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they finally recognized him. They realized that they were in the presence of the living God.

And immediately he disappears! He vanishes from their sight as soon as they realize who he is. So now what?

This teaches us about the importance of what we do after we worship Jesus. We are to go out to love and serve the Lord and proclaim God's grace to all who will hear. This story teaches us how to join others on their journey; to step into each other's lives with love and understanding. It underlines our interdependence, our connectedness, the importance of listening to each other, especially as we share our pain and doubt. We are reminded to help each other see that our stories are caught up in God's story and in the story of the death and resurrection of God's son. We are called to go out and share our faith and our joy with the world.

My prayer is that our eyes can be opened so that we can recognize Jesus in our midst. May our hearts burn with joy as we see our story wrapped up in his. May we always be eager to share the joy of his resurrection and his presence among us.

To the glory of God. Amen