

Sometimes preaching seems to be schizophrenic. Last week I talked about the disciples being holed up in a room behind locked doors. You'll remember that it was the evening of the resurrection and Jesus came to meet them. He greeted them in peace, then breathed the Holy Spirit upon them, and then said it they retain the sins of any they are retained and if they forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. We realized this was a call to mission and evangelism, because in John's gospel forgiveness of sins means being in relationship with God. So, the disciples are sent out - except the reading continues one week later where were they? Back in the locked room for fear and waiting.

I mentioned that all too many Christians see their faith and the church the same way. They are a support system to deal with the challenges of life, rather than a means of empowerment to share the gospel. We, of course, should be empowered evangelists, not scared disciples huddling in a room and constantly begging for support.

Well that was last week. This week stands as somewhat of a contrast. Our gospel reading is the road to Emmaus story, which you may know well. We are back on Easter evening again and two disciples are walking down the road away from Jerusalem. We learn that they are disciples and they are pretty dejected about everything that had happened to Jesus. They are also confused of the reports of the empty tomb. Jesus meets them on the road, but they do not recognize him - or the text says they were kept from recognizing him. They travel together for some time and Jesus explains a lot of things to them, but they still don't get it. Then, in a meal that looks a lot like Communion, they suddenly recognize Jesus - but he vanishes.

If you're like me, this story is frustrating to you. It causes too many questions and gives too few answers. And there is one phrase I want to focus on. The disciples say to Jesus, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

"We had hoped..." How often have you heard that sort of phrase when your hopes are dashed? After an unsuccessful surgery you hear, "We had hoped that it would work." Or the family of an alcoholic who hopes that this time he would stay

sober - 'we had hoped.' Or the board of directors after a major product launch that would save the company, "We had hoped."

"We had hoped" are the words of dashed hopes - but not crazy unrealistic hopes. No, real, rational, reasonable hopes. Something should have worked. There was good reason for hope. But it didn't.

It is easy to snicker at the ignorance of the first disciples of Jesus because of what they did not know. They didn't understand what he was saying. They couldn't comprehend what he himself prophesied would happen. And especially, they didn't know what to look for in the promised messiah.

But that's just it. Jesus wasn't what they were looking for. A messiah was someone who, in times of oppression, would lead the people to freedom and strength. Messiahs were government and military powers. They threw off oppressors.

Think of it this way. What do you expect when you buy a new car? A dependable, long lasting purchase. It will safely

get you where you want to go. And it will have that new car smell - at least for a while. Now let's say your next door neighbor buys a brand new luxury car. You see it pull into the driveway as they are bringing it home from the dealer. It is all shiny and glistening. You go over to congratulate your neighbor on such a fine car, offer praise (even if you think the thing is stupid and ugly), and you may be a little jealous.

Then, the next day when you come home from work there sits your neighbor's brand new luxury car in his front lawn. He's taken off the hood, removed the engine, and planted flowers in the engine compartment! What!?! You just don't do that to a new luxury car. It's meant to be driven - not be big a flower pot!

Messiahs lead revolutions. They don't get executed.

Now, we can look at what happens to Jesus and learn that God does not always do things according to expectations. We also know that God's way is the best way, and what makes no sense in the moment proves to be right in the long run. But it's still frustrating!

Actually more than frustrating, it can be enraging. Remind yourself of some situation where you have felt yourself say, "We had hoped..." And look at what is going on with the guys on the road to Emmaus. They are feeling depressed and hopeless. The hopes and dreams of their lives have been dashed. Then Jesus comes up and we are told that their eyes were kept from recognizing him. This means it is God's work that they can't recognize him. And then later on as soon as they do recognize him, he vanishes! Poof! Gone! The disciples are now excited, but I can't help being frustrated with God and saying, "Quit teasing! This is real life and people are getting hurt. Don't play games with us!"

Again, we can use the catch-all answer that we've invented: Well, we trust it to God's wisdom. But let's not let it go quite so easily. Here is where we contrast with last week, where we thought we should be energized and excited by our faith in God.

We need to remember our faith ancestors, the Jews; and their experience of God. A look through the Old Testament shows

you that the relationship between God and the Jews was not a pretty one. Sure, the people messed up more than plenty of times. But there were also many times where it seems like God is absent too. Many times God doesn't seem to stay true to promises. The blood line of David gets lost. The temple is destroyed, the holy city of Jerusalem is conquered, burnt, and reduced to rubble.

Over and over again faithful people in the Old Testament cry out to God, "Why?" and, "Where are you?" "Why won't you listen to me?" "Don't you care?"

Our Jewish faith ancestors knew that being in relationship with God was not a stroll through the park. They got mad at God. They cursed and screamed. Even their great heroes: Moses, Abraham, David, Elijah and the other great prophets all had tumultuous lives, and plenty of periods of doubt. In just about every case they turned to God as some point in their lives and said, "That's it! I quit!" and walked away. They were fed up with God.

And they also discovered that God didn't let go of them.  
The response was, "Resignation not accepted."

Faith like this isn't pretty. It's not what we want. But  
it is what we have. And it is strong.

Your Lord loves you, and wants to have you. I cannot  
explain why God does what God does, but I can say that God won't  
let go. Though sometimes joyful and sometimes enraging, God  
still holds on to you. It isn't an easy message to go out into  
the world to witness to, but it is a powerful message that our  
world needs to know. Amen