

# THE SADDEST WORDS

## Sermon, April 26, 2020

### Text: Luke 24:13-49

At the outset of worship we observed a moment of silence. I prefaced the moment of silence with the following words; as they relate to the sermon's introduction, I include them here: *"I'm deeply grieved to have to inform you another dear and cherished church member has departed this life. Frances Helen Reed Bonn unexpectedly and suddenly passed away early Wednesday morning. I hate that we cannot mourn our loved ones properly during these quarantine restrictions; unfortunately, with the present restrictions funeral parties are limited to five mourners. A memorial service will be held here at the church at a later date. Many of you knew and loved Fran; she and her late husband Jim officially joined the church in 1963 and were actively involved in many aspects of the church's life and ministry. High school sweethearts; they married May 27, 1950, and eventually became the parents of five and grandparents of ten. Together they faithfully and lovingly honored their marriage covenant until death did them part January 21, 2005. I/we can take some comfort in knowing Fran and Jim are now reunited and in the great company of the Church Triumphant, the church eternal ... where Fran has now been received by God, and dwells in His presence forever. The sermon today is entitled 'The Saddest Words'... I'd like to recall what poet William Goldsmith Brown calls the Sweetest words: "The sweetest sounds to mortals given are heard in Mother, Home and Heaven." Susan, Nancy, Donald, Steve and Jim, if you're watching, let me use these sweetest words to give you this assurance from God: Your Mother is Home in Heaven."*

Earlier I talked about the "sweetest sounds to mortals given;" now I'd like to highlight what are the *saddest* sounds to mortals given. Some of the saddest words in the English language begin with the letter "D" ... death, disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, discouragement, depression, despair. To be fair, some happy words, too, begin with "D" ... doggy, daisy, delightful, doughnuts from Allie's (*which I'm discouraged, depressed and despairing because Allie's is closed for this quarantine!*). But, the saddest words I'm thinking about? None of them begin with "D." Five years ago in another sermon by this same title, I drew attention to what poet John Greenleaf Whittier suggested were the saddest words. His nineteenth century poem "Maud Muller" ends with these words, *"For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: 'IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN!'"* And, I would say, he's close! Part of the reason those words "It Might Have Been" are so sad is that those who constantly dwell on and pine over What Might Have Been are running the risk of letting their past adversely affect their present, which in turn will adversely affect their future! Don't let your past have a future! It is past, it is forgiven, move on! Quit being miserable and maudlin in the life you now live because of your sadly romanticizing about what might have been! But that's another sermon.

What I think are actually the saddest words in the English language are found in our Gospel reading this morning. In the latter part of today's reading we are where we were last week when we looked at John's gospel, in that locked room on Easter Sunday night; today's account is the more detailed story and background from Luke's perspective and it gives an account of something else that happened that day, this meeting of the risen Jesus with two travelers on the road to Emmaus. As our Gospel passage opens these two disciples are walking back home, Emmaus is about seven miles from Jerusalem, not terribly far. They are walking back home, back to the world they had known before they had met Jesus, before the whole project had come crashing down around them with Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, execution, and burial. Yes, we're told they had heard some of the women had gone back to the tomb and found it empty, and these women said they saw an angel who told them Jesus was alive. But who could believe them? Would you? Would any of us?

These two despondent disciples had certainly not seen Jesus. As they walked along, a third person comes up and begins to walk with them. **We** are told this is Jesus, but they weren't ... they don't recognize Him, at least not yet. As they walked along Jesus asked them, *"So, what are you talking about?"* Or, to put it even more in the vernacular, *"What's happening?"* The text tells us, *"They stood still, their faces downcast."* I'm admittedly reading between the lines a bit, but I think they were sort of stunned, dumbfounded, stopped in their tracks that this fellow traveler who obviously had been around that weekend in Jerusalem was apparently completely unaware of the recent events that had just rocked their world. One of them asked, and I think a bit incredulously, *"Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know about the things that have happened here?"* Jesus responds (*and I think with something of a twinkle in His eye*), **"What things?"**

Now, Jerusalem was a big town, and the chances are good some completely missed the death of Jesus ... it's understandable someone may not have known about the events that so upended the lives of these two forlorn travelers. Those of you who have grieved the loss of a loved one know something of why they reacted as they did. When you lose someone you cherish, when something bad happens to someone you love (*for that matter, when something bad happens to you*), it can be almost infuriating that life just goes on for others. It's not entirely rational, but it is how you feel. You almost want to bite the person's head off who doesn't seem to care for, or even know about, what's going on in your life ... but the reality just may be that this person has no idea. A related quick aside, but seventeenth century theologian Jeremy Taylor used to counsel aspiring ministers, *"Speak kindly to everyone you meet, for everyone has a problem."* Everyone has some sort of battle and/emotional difficulty he or she is fighting; all of us have our battles. The great twentieth century theologian ... Ann Landers ... wrote, *"Be kind to people. The world needs kindness so much. You never know what sort of battles other people are fighting. Often just a soft word or a warm compliment can be immensely supportive. You can do a great deal of good by just being considerate, by extending a little friendship, going out of your way to*

do just one nice thing, or saying one good word." We come across people every single day who are being beat up by ... life. Be patient, be kind, be understanding.

Another little aside: We are told one of the disciples was called Cleopas. Use a Bible concordance and look up the name "Cleopas," you will find this name referenced one other time, in John 19:25 -- "*Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene.*" So, the wife of Cleopas (named Mary) was present at the crucifixion. And if it's the same Cleopas, there is no reason not to assume his wife Mary was the other person on this road to Emmaus; they were a husband and wife traveling together (*nothing in the text says these were two men*). She had been present at the cross, seen Jesus crucified, saw the nails driven into His hands, saw the spear thrust into His side, and I'm sure she told her husband all about it. They had no doubt Christ was dead.<sup>1</sup> So, Cleo and Mary (*if, indeed, it is them*) are probably trying hard to suppress their irritation with this person who doesn't seem to know or care of what's going on: "*Don't you know what has happened? Jesus is dead. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed. We had hoped He would be the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped He would be the one to set us free.*"

And there it is. Those are the three saddest words. "*We had hoped....*" Now, they no longer hoped. Now, their hope was dead. Now they had no hope. Things were just not going to change. This was the way it was. Their hope had no future. People can deal with many setbacks in life, but losing all hope is just deadly. Only a week before, their hope had risen to fever pitch when the excited crowds welcomed their Master waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna." But now, with Jesus dead, their hope died, as well. Many of those bad "D" words mentioned earlier sum up how this couple was feeling as they trudged that road to Emmaus. *Disappointment. Disillusionment. Defeat. Doubt. Discouragement. Depression. Despair.* And yes, we know something of what they felt. At some time or another, I'm sure any one of us here this morning has said, "*We had hoped...*" "*We had hoped the illness would be healed. We had hoped this political figure would be the one to lead us toward change, prosperity, peace. We had hoped (fill in the blank). We had hoped this quarantine would end soon and we can get back to work and our friends and our families.*" There isn't a person here who can't identify with the feelings expressed by those three saddest words, "**We. Had. Hoped.**"

Excuse yet one more aside, but this to me is one of the most difficult things about the way the officials have rolled out and sustained this quarantine. Again, there are a few notable exceptions, but there is something just WRONG when these government officials basically say over and over, almost paternally and condescendingly as if they were speaking to children, "*Don't Get Your Hopes Up. Ohh, things might never get back to normal. Why, this might go on for a year, maybe longer! And a second wave may come. Get used to it.*" **PLEASE!** Just stop it! People who've lost jobs and have little in savings, people who can't attend church, people who can't even go out to a local restaurant, people who can't see loved ones, lonely people confined to nursing homes devoid of visitors ... THEY NEED HOPE; they need encouragement. There are actually **many** hopeful signs out there; if you dig a little, you can find them! But for the most part (*from my admittedly subjective personal experience*), we just aren't hearing about them. Let us hear HOPE!

End of rant; back to the text. What do we do when hope is gone? I suggest two things, both clearly implied in this passage. **First**, tell Jesus about it, and **second**, with His aid read and engage the Scriptures! In short, *pray and get to know your Bible!* This couple did not realize they were doing it, but when their hope was gone *they talked to Jesus about it*. They told Him all about their disappointed hope. Then, Jesus helped them to understand how the Scriptures really did relate to what they were going through. Jesus helped them to understand how the Scriptures related to what they thought were their dashed hopes. When they took their despair to Jesus, Jesus brought them to the Bible and revealed these words in a whole, new, hope-full way. And we are told their "*hearts burned within them*" as their hope was re-kindled. The sad words, "*We had hoped,*" are transformed to, "*We now hope again.*" Where before they had *no hope*, now they *know hope*. It sounds like almost a trite point to make, but the principle is nevertheless true: Whatever has caused you to lose hope, talk to Jesus about it, and then go to the Scriptures and ask Him to teach you through these pages the truth about *what really is*, ask Him to teach you the truth of your perceived disappointment. Again, where before they had no hope, now they know hope.

And then, poof! Jesus just disappears ... and Cleo and Mary got up and probably *ran* the seven miles back to Jerusalem and found the disciples and the others in that locked room we talked about last week and they told them what they saw. And that is when the living Prince of Peace Jesus Christ appears in their midst in that locked room and dispels that "We Had Hoped" sadness by proclaiming with authority and power the most invigorating words that crowd could hear, "Shalom." (*which is translated "Peace be with you."*) Hope is alive, and is in their midst!

Jesus makes clear to the disciples He is alive ... He is not a memory, He is not a ghost; He is the opposite of a ghost ... He is a living, animated being! And then He goes on to recruit as His witnesses other living, animated beings, people who now have rekindled hope. He wants them to move out and tell everyone who will listen about what makes for real life. That's what this *back-to-life Jesus* wants of His disciples: living, hope-ful, witnesses. Not pious ghosts haunting the pews and pining away about what might have been, about our past hopes, but living, breathing, active, loving and hopeful bodies that witness to LIFE, working to bring life and hope to all about us, through the grace and presence and hope of a living Lord Jesus Christ who is always in our midst. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> See James Boice's article on this at: <http://www.jesus.org/death-and-resurrection/resurrection/who-were-the-disciples-on-the-road-to-emmaus.html>