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Luke 24:13-35

RESURRECTION GRAMMAR

Just two weeks ago we celebrated Easter. Maybe you were here and you remember the beautiful flowers, the triumphant sounding brass, the joyful music, the greetings of "Happy Easter!" However, as joyful as that day was, the truth is that Easter does not *begin* with joy. Rather, Easter begins with profound disappointment.

We hear about some of that disappointment as two of the disciples travel from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus. It is Sunday afternoon. Earlier in the day, some of the women followers of Jesus had told the disciples a strange story about two men who appeared to them at the tomb and announced that Jesus was risen. But who could believe such an impossible story? These two disciples are joined by a stranger who is Jesus, but the disciples don't know that it's Jesus just yet. And this stranger doesn't seem to know about the events that had just taken place in Jerusalem. So the two disciples begin to tell him all about it--about Jesus who was a great prophet and teacher, how he had been so meaningful to them, and then about his arrest and his horrible death. And then the disciples acknowledge something: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped. Those three little words tell a giant story.

If we just look at the grammatical structure of these words, we can learn a lot. The Greek imperfect tense used here--*we had hoped*--suggests a past action that was continuous. It wasn't *we hoped*, as in a one time, completed action, but rather, *we had hoped*, indicating that the action of hoping had been a growing, developing action. We might imagine how this hope grew gradually in the hearts of the disciples--as they listened to his strange but compelling teachings about God, as they witnessed Jesus' healing of the sick, as they saw him feed the hungry, as he as

he inspired even the most ordinary among them to feel empowered with God's love. Gradually this hope that he was the one to redeem Israel grew within them. But the grammar of this phrase, *we had hoped*, also reveals that this hope has now come to a crashing end. The events of the past days in Jerusalem have ended this habit of hoping. *We had hoped* speaks of a future that is not to be, of a hope that is not to be realized. And it leaves behind a gaping hole of what could have been.

This is where Easter finds the disciples. And this is where Easter finds many of us-- living with the reality of disappointment, living with the imperfect tense: we had hoped.

We had hoped on that sunny day long ago that our marriage would last til death do us part. We had hoped.

We had hoped that the treatments were working.

We had hoped that he would get the job.

We had hoped that her addiction had been conquered for good.

We had hoped that we would finally have time to spend together and travel after retirement.

We had hoped to have children.

We had hoped that the new church growth program would revive our congregation.

We had hoped that the counseling would save our marriage.

We had hoped when we were younger that we might become a doctor, an artist, a writer.

We had hoped for better things for ourselves and our life.

But things happened. And our hopes collapsed, leaving behind a gaping hole of what could have been.

Easter begins with broken hearts and broken dreams and broken lives. Later, later the disciples will recall how their hearts burned within them as Jesus, the stranger, walked with them. Later they will know the joy of the burning hearts and the risen Jesus. But before burning hearts, Easter begins with broken hearts. The grammar of *we had hoped*, this imperfect tense, tells the painful story of our human story of disappointment and loss and sorrow.

We are not always comfortable, however, with the reality of disappointment. And so often we will rush to embrace the future tense. When I was in college my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was greatly troubled by this news and I recall a well intentioned friend reassuring me, "Don't worry. Everything will be alright." Now how in the world could she make such a promise? Was she clairvoyant? Did she have some crystal ball? In our discomfort with human suffering, we rush to the future tense. And we are relieved when people we care about who are suffering in some way reassure us that they will be alright. Can you imagine how it would feel if someone who was suffering were to tell us honestly, "I am not alright and I can't imagine ever being alright again." It is hard to hear such pain. We want to move people and ourselves past this difficult time of pain as quickly as we can, and so sometimes we move into the future tense too quickly.

But we had hoped. That's the reality of many people. *We had hoped*. Easter does not come to push aside that pain with some kind of superficial happy clappy joy. Easter speaks to that deep pain, that deep disappointment, to our lives held hostage by the imperfect tense of *we had hoped*. Because instead of pushing aside our pain, the Resurrection is about God *entering* our pain and lifting us to a different kind of life.

The Resurrection has its own interesting grammar. The traditional Christian affirmation of the Resurrection is: Christ is risen! Now this is an unusual sentence construction. We have

the word *risen* as the past tense, but it is coupled with the word *is* which is in the present tense. You will sometimes hear people say "Christ *has* risen," but that is not the traditional Christian affirmation. Christ *has* risen implies a completed past action. But the Christian affirmation is: "Christ *is* risen" which emphasizes the present state of a past action. I have read some who argue that in this sentence the word *risen* functions as an adjective that describes the state of Christ in the present moment. Christ is risen. Theologically, we Christians embrace this strange sentence construction of "Christ is risen" because it speaks the truth we believe: that the Resurrection is not just a past event long ago but is also a present reality and a future hope. The Resurrection mixes up our grammar just as it mixes up the events of our lives so we think about life in a new way.

Thus the Resurrection defies our linguistic abilities to speak about it in grammatically sensible ways and defies our ability to neatly categorized our lives into the past, present or future. We can't separate *we had hoped*, the imperfect tense of disappointment and loss, from *Christ is risen*. There is joyful news that Christ is risen. But it grows out of the painful reality of *we had hoped*. And the two live together, intertwined. I wonder if you have ever had that experience yourself, of the two realities living intertwined within you--of carrying a heavy burden within your heart, a heavy disappointment or sorrow, *we had hoped*, but you kept getting out of bed each day and carrying on, and living and loving, because you also believed *Christ is risen*. They butt up against each other in life: *we had hoped* and *Christ is risen*. *Christ is risen* does not make the pain all go away. It just refocuses our eyes and hearts to see what God is doing in the midst of the realities we live.

Royce and Keri Young were thrilled to learn that Keri was pregnant with a baby girl. They named her Eva and began to plan for her to join their family, as they dreamed of who she

might be and how she would become a sister to their young son. But in the course of the pregnancy they received unthinkable news. Eva did not have a brain, a rare abnormality that meant she would not live long after birth. Royce and Keri were obviously crushed to receive this news. All their "we had hoped" for their daughter collapsed with this news. But then the couple made a decision that surprised even their doctor. Instead of terminating the pregnancy, Royce and Keri decided to carry the child to term so that they could donate her organs to another child in need. They decided to participate in a resurrection activity. It was not an easy process, this gift they offered. This resurrection activity they chose to participate in meant that they constantly lived with the reality of their crushing disappointment and loss. Every time the baby kicked or rolled over within her, every time Keri's back hurt or her feet got sore, all the normal pregnancy woes that generally result in a joyful outcome, all these reminded Keri that the baby she was carrying would die. And when they went to the hospital to give birth, they knew they would not be coming home with their child. Royce and Keri found joy in knowing that Eva's life would make life possible for others. But that knowledge never eradicated their crushing disappointment. Royce reflected that: "A lot of people say things like, 'I wouldn't change anything' after a trying circumstance, but I'm not about to say that. I would definitely change this if I could. I want my daughter to be perfect. I want her to blow out her candles on her first birthday. I want to watch her bang her head on our coffee table trying to learn to walk. I want her to run up a cell phone bill texting boys. I want to walk her down an aisle. I want to change it all so badly. But I can't. This is our reality. And there's no stopping it."

Easter does not begin with joy. Easter begins with profound disappointment. It begins with the imperfect tense of *we had hoped*. But into this journey of profound disappointment comes the risen Christ, walking beside us, raising us daily, even hourly, to a new kind of life.