



We Found God in a Hopeless Place

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“But we had hoped...” I imagine Jesus wincing at the words of the Emmaus Road disciples when they tell him to his face that they were disappointed in him, though they did not know they were speaking to Jesus at the time. It might be better that their eyes were prevented from recognizing Jesus: it enables readers to catch a rare glimpse of someone telling Jesus the truth about their experience without filtering their grief. The Emmaus disciples’ hopes in Jesus to redeem Israel were frustrated. These disciples did what any of us would do after the death of a loved one—eventually, they went home. They only recognized him after he departed from them.

As seen in several stories in the New Testament, Christian hope is a complicated thing. Although hope is assured, it is not always an immediate thing. Rather, hope is Christ pushes the boundaries of time and space, drawing us into new life in Christ, even in the midst of the traumas of this life. The promise of Christian hope is that Christ is with us, now and always.

Hopes and its frustration bookend the Gospel of Luke: Simeon waits for the redemption of Israel (Luke 2:25–32), and the Emmaus Road disciples were frustrated because they had hoped Jesus would be the one to accomplish this redemption (Luke 24:13–35). Throughout his ministry, Jesus engages those whose hopes have been frustrated. This engagement is especially prominent in Jesus’s sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4, where Jesus proclaims a liberation and a release, and in Luke 7–8, where we meet two parents whose children have died. Jesus enters into the spaces of frustrated hopes and dreams deferred and makes new realities possible. While it is unclear what sort of redemption Cleopas and his companion hoped for in Jesus, it is clear that Jesus did not fulfill those hopes, at least they didn’t think so when they met Jesus on the road.

Christian hope, whatever else it entails, starts with frustrated hopes. These frustrated hopes are a fertile ground for faith. It is the place of waiting for a future that has not yet happened,¹ and looking for God’s creative and redemptive work. All that we hope for, all that we wait for, awaits Christ’s transformation. When it seems all hope has been lost, the Emmaus Road disciples inspire us to look for Jesus on our path.

The path the characters in the Gospel of Luke trod, however, is one that is beguiled by threat, opposition, and hopelessness. Since 63 BCE, Judea had been occupied by Roman forces. Rome exacted both direct and indirect taxes to fund the expansion of the empire. These taxes enabled the construction of roads, aqueducts, and other infrastructure that improved the flow of goods and services out of Judea (and likely travel within the region). While there are a variety of opinions on the level to which these taxes burdened the inhabitants of Judea, there were Jewish representatives—notably from the region of Galilee—who sought to protest this taxation,² leading to the Jewish-Roman War (66–73 CE). Nazareth was within the region of Lower Galilee. Jesus’s family, friends, and first followers would have likely been aware of if not active participants in such tensions.

¹ Here, I borrow from our Spanish-speaking siblings’ language: the word commonly translated as hope in Spanish is *esperar*, which at its root entails waiting, often for something that is as yet unseen. This faithful waiting is important—crucial—to understanding Christian hope. Special thanks to Rebecca Hays, reminded me that Hebrew also has a shared valence between the words translated as “hope” and “wait.”

² Josephus, *Ant.* 18:1.1, 23; Acts 5:37.

Jesus’s first sermon promises the return of hope, especially for those who find themselves in hopeless situations. The promise of release from captivity, sight to the blind, freedom from oppression, and the favor of the LORD (Luke 4:18–19) came to those who were captive and oppressed in their natal land. Hope was probably relegated to long ago and far away, as the memories of self-determination and rule faded into the new reality. While Rome was—by no means—the worst conquering group Judea had seen (at least relative to the Assyrians and Babylonians), the people still did not enjoy the same freedoms as they had prior to 63 BCE. After proclaiming the seemingly unrealistic promises of release, liberation, and sight, Jesus sits down, repeatedly saying to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The NRSVUE suggests that Jesus *begins* to say this phrase to the crowd, but, based on their strong reactions, it seems more likely that Jesus *continues* to assert that the scriptures have been fulfilled. But how?

Often, when we read texts like Luke 4 (and Luke 24), we read them from the perspective of the main character—Jesus—but what we see and learn from the text changes when we listen alongside other characters. In this case, reading with these other characters paints a scene rife with tension. Jesus, the child conceived by an unwed mother, adopted by a peasant carpenter, living in an occupied territory, reads two verses from the scroll. As he sits down, he insists that these things Isaiah prophesied (Isa 61:1–2) have come to be. All we know of Jesus’s ministry so far is that after his baptism and temptation, Jesus “returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone” (Luke 4:14–15). The Gospel of Luke has not reported any miracles before narrating the sermon at Nazareth. Jesus’s insistence that the promises of release and liberation have been fulfilled have decidedly not happened yet, and even still, the people speak well of him.

The synagogue scene shifts dramatically when Jesus puts words in the people’s mouths: “He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’” (Luke 4:23). Jesus continues by reminding his hometown auditors that Elijah and Elisha performed miracles for outsiders—a widow at Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. The conversation

takes a violent turn. Jesus's story seems like it will end before it begins as the townspeople threaten to throw him off a cliff. While the people are perhaps rankling at Jesus's inclusion of outsiders here, part of me wonders if this passion and this frustration come from the frustrated hopes. Jesus proclaims liberation and release, insists that the scripture has been fulfilled, and then informs the people that the release—the miracles, the hope, the justice—will not be coming to Nazareth on that day. The response conjures Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem":

What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?³

The problem at Nazareth is not that the people do not believe in Jesus. The problem at Nazareth is that they do. After his sermon, the people are ready: they are ready for healing, they are ready for hope, they are ready for their deferred dreams to be realized. Their response anticipates the response of Cleopas to Jesus: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). It seems likely that the people at Nazareth had much the same hope. Rather than casting aspersions on Jesus by saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22b), based on the fact that the quote comes immediately after speaking well of him, this exclamation more likely continues the trajectory of commentary. It was one of pride. Maybe this man will be the one.

The worst part of hope, especially hope in Jesus, is the "not yet." Sometimes it is easier to give up on hoping for release, healing, and liberation than it is to hope for something that might not happen. But this sort of hope isn't Christian hope. Christian hope, at least as it

³ Langston Hughes, "Harlem," *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

appears in the Gospel of Luke, carries us through the liminal spaces—even through death—and draws us into new life, even if we cannot see it in the moment. Christian hope traffics in deferred dreams: the dried up, the festering, and the hope that lumbers under the weight of them not being realized, and Jesus carries the explosion of these deferred hopes and dreams to the cross.

Christian hope takes root in liminal spaces, where hope deferred (or frustrated) seems like hope denied. Paradoxically, Christians look for hope in spaces that so often seem bereft of it because these are the places Jesus shows up. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus physically shows up in these sorts of places: spaces between belief and doubt, separation and connection, health and illness, and death and life. I focus on the final of these three pairs to highlight the expectation that Jesus builds throughout his ministry of showing up at boundaries of life and death, building the audience's expectation that he will show in places such as the Emmaus Road.

During his ministry, Jesus does release those who are captive to unclean spirits, heal the sick, and release those who are bound; he also raises the dead. Jesus approaches the funeral procession for a widow's only son at Nain. This moment, one of the most hopeless and devastating moments a parent could face, is where Jesus shows up. The woman's hopes for her child, whatever they were, would not be realized. Without an introduction or any pleasantries, Jesus tells her "do not cry" (Luke 7:13b). Before we learn how the woman responds, the narrative moves on and flips on its head: "Young man, I say to you, rise" (Luke 7:15). In response to the man's resuscitation, the people recognize the importance of what has happened: they believe that a great prophet has risen and that God has visited them (Luke 7:17). The woman faced an eternally-deferred hope: the death of a loved one. Jesus arrives on the scene, unbidden, releasing the young man from the grip of death.

In the next chapter, Luke's penchant for pairing male and female characters comes to the fore. Jairus approaches Jesus so that he might heal his "tweenage" daughter, his only child. As he waits for the teacher to come with him, the child dies. His insensitive friends, reminiscent of Job's,⁴ tell him to quit troubling the teacher (he needs new friends). When Jesus approaches, the crowd of mourners outside derides Jesus

⁴ See Job 2–37.

when he insists the girl is sleeping. Perhaps they deride Jesus because they are immeasurably rude; it would be more reasonable, however, to interpret their derision of Jesus as the result of *them* finding *him* immeasurably rude and insensitive to these poor parents, who will now bury their only daughter. Jesus enters the liminal space between death and life, and he raises the girl much the way he raised the young man at Nain, saying, “Little girl, get up” (Luke 8:54). She, like the young man from Nain, was released from death and restored to her parents.

Jesus enters the liminal space of death. Jesus asks people to cultivate hope in these spaces before there is a glimmer of hope. Jesus asks the widow at Nain to not cry and tells Jairus to believe when their children are dead. These commands come in the midst of the ultimate realization of frustrated hope: the death of a child.

The Emmaus Road disciples find themselves walking a similar path of frustrated hopes as they leave Jerusalem. Their hopelessness, as Parsons rightly notes, is palpable.⁵ Their hopes *in Jesus* were frustrated. This Jesus, who raised the dead, was raised from the dead. The Emmaus Road disciples remind us that—at least at first—it was unclear what this resurrection meant. Though these disciples knew that Jesus had been raised, their hope was nevertheless frustrated: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Israel, to them, remained unredeemed. Jesus arrives yet again in the midst of this frustrated hope between death and life.

While it is clear that the Emmaus Road disciples are dealing with frustrated hopes, it is unclear what they were hoping for. François Bovon asks, “What kind of Israel’s deliverance was meant? Deliverance from the Romans and political oppression or from sin and the inevitable death? Whatever it was, the hope was in the dim past.”⁶ According to Bovon, this scene does not represent hope deferred, but hope denied. Mikeal Parsons notes the gravity of their disappointment: “The hope for Israel’s deliverance (from spiritual oppression? from the Romans? from exile?) they once placed in Jesus lies shattered by the events they have attempted to describe dispassionately.”⁷ One can almost imagine the bluntness of grief and the absence of emotion

⁵ Mikeal Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 350.

⁶ François Bovon, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 3: 373.

⁷ Parsons, *Luke*, 350.

taking root after experiencing not only the trauma of witnessing their teacher’s death, but heightened by their shattering disappointment in his failure. Javier Alanís suggests that the Emmaus Road disciples have lost hope: “The word ‘hope’ in Spanish is translated as *esperanza*, from the root word, *esperar*, ‘to wait for something.’ So, to lose hope is to stop waiting for a hoped-for outcome, in this case the freedom that would come from the actions of the liberator, Jesus of Nazareth. They were not expecting a crucifixion!”⁸ The disciples now find themselves in the same position as the widow at Nain and as Jairus. They are being asked to hope at the height of hopelessness and despair.

The reader can remember what these disciples apparently cannot: at the height of frustrated hopes, Jesus comes. The reader knows that this stranger is Jesus. But what if we were actually walking with Cleopas and the other disciple? What if we knew only what they knew? What if we didn’t abandon them to their ignorance? I think that if we walk with these disciples long enough, we will recognize that they serve as a mirror to our own ignorance of when Jesus shows up in our own lives and our proclivity to abandon hope rather than live in its not-yetness.

Jesus enters into the space of hope deferred and of hope denied. The Emmaus Road disciples walk away from the city where their hopes were dashed with Jesus’s death. This one, who promised release from captivity and liberation from oppression could not release or liberate himself. Even the news of his resurrection could not persuade these disciples to stay in the city and see what would happen next. So they walked away.

Cleopas and his companion seem to have accepted the reality of denied hope. As they walk away from the city, Jesus joins their journey as an interloper and asks what they are talking about. Note the awkwardness of the scene: instead of passing by on the other side of the street, ignoring the conversation that he is not a part of, or politely adjusting his pace, Jesus engages them. When Cleopas shares his disappointment in Jesus with Jesus (of course, not knowing that it is him), the reader catches a glimpse of how frustrated hopes and trauma intersect with belief, especially belief in Jesus. Jesus breaks up the moment of tension by exclaiming: “Oh, how dense and slow in

⁸ Javier Alanís, “The Walk to Emmaus or La Caminata a Emaús from Luke 24:13–35,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 2 (2023): 41.

heart you are to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25–26). The disciples apparently do not take offense at this suggestion, and Jesus explains the scriptures from the beginning (cf. Luke 1:3). Jesus enters into the space of hope denied and walks with these disciples; as soon as they recognize him, he disappears from their sight.

So often, like Cleopas and his companion, we recognize Jesus's presence in the midst of our frustrated hopes only after the fact. After realizing that their interloper on the road to Emmaus was Jesus, Cleopas and his companion head for the city "that same hour" (Luke 24:33). They waste no time in their departure. Having urged Jesus to stay with them because it was evening—perhaps for fears of safety, perhaps to show hospitality to a stranger as their culture and their faith expected them to do—it was surely well into the night before they left for Jerusalem. They return to the other disciples.

The other disciples are still talking about the events of the day, putting together the pieces of information as they try to make sense of their new reality. The disciples recount Jesus's appearance to Simon, and Cleopas and his companion relate their experience of Jesus on the road. The disciples are piecing together hope in the wake of crucifixion, the empty tomb, and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Together, they seem to be rebuilding an expression of hope and rebuilding their memories: it is on the path of deferred and denied hope that Jesus shows up. Here again, Jesus appears. Here again, Jesus explains the necessity of his death and elucidates the scriptures, even in the midst of their doubt (Luke 24:41). Doubt is not a barrier to hope; doubt is hope's midwife, coaxing it into being. Jesus does not ask the disciples to stop doubting. He meets them in their doubt.

Jesus shows up in the spaces of frustrated hope. He proclaims release and liberation to a people who live in an occupied land and whose rights of self-determination were stripped by external forces. Jesus places himself on the path of those whose grief and trauma know no words, including the death of a child and those who witness the state-sanctioned execution of an innocent person.

Christian hope asserts that Jesus shows up in the places of deferred and denied hope. Lutheran theology takes the concept a step further to assert that the weakness and humiliation of the cross is where Christians fully recognize God. Luther asserts that God is

hidden in suffering and that God is recognized in the humility and shame of the cross.⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge on July 16, 1944, asserts a similar concept: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us... Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering."¹⁰ Jesus walks in solidarity with the hopeless, and the cross serves as the pinnacle of solidarity with those who experience frustrated hopes.

We must not misuse this understanding of deferred hopes, however. Asserting to someone else that Jesus is to be found in the most traumatic and hopeless circumstances of their lives is the opposite of a Christian virtue, and it is the opposite of what Jesus did. We often fail to follow Jesus's example. We too quickly abandon those who have lost hope or rush those whose hope is not quickly restored. Hope does not work this way, and it is not how Christians should respond to those who find themselves in spaces of deferred hope. Jesus, as the Christian pattern and example, entered into the grief and hopelessness with the people. He drew near. It is not enough for Christians or the church to say "Jesus is with you." Rather, it is our obligation to be "little Christs," to be with the person in their hopelessness and grief and say, "I am with you."

The exchange on the road to Emmaus has much to teach us. Christian hope demands that we live in the not-yetness of its frustration. The question remains for us: How do we walk with the unnamed, the stranger, the one who has just come through death, whether physical, emotional, or metaphorical? Isaac Moreno Sanz likens the road to Emmaus with the path of life: "During the journey, whether it be to Emaús or the journey of life, there are many [lit: not a few] who have lost hope."¹¹ We live and walk among those who have lost hope and

⁹ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–) 31:35–70.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 360–371.

¹¹ Original: "Durante el camino, ya sea a Emaús, ya sea el camino de la vida, no son pocos los que pierden la esperanza," in Isaac Moreno Sanz, "'Se reunieron a examinar el asunto', La sinoalidad lucana: del camino de Emaús a la asamblea de Jerusalén," *Estudios Bíblicos* 81 (2023): 269.

those whose deferred hopes become their reality. The only thing worse than losing hope is the feeling of loneliness and abandonment by our families, friends, and even our churches once it has been lost. It should not be so among us.

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Christian hope takes root in deferred hopes; doubt is hope's midwife, inspiring us to question: How is it possible that God would show up here? Despite all evidence to the contrary, the hopeless and God-forsaken places are the very places God has promised to show up. These are the places Jesus goes, and he invites us to come with him. While we are required to live into the not-yetness of this journey, we are also called to proclaim the stories, the new realities, that God has created in hopeless places. Alanís rightly states: "We live in the tension of liminal space. We are a kin-dom of people proclaiming new realities and promises while living in a broken world. There is tension here, but it is also a creative space where the Sacred encounters and transforms our being."¹² The church and its people are invited into this creative space where Jesus shows up, proclaiming new realities of liberation and release, and insisting that scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. ⊕

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¹² Javier Alanís, "The Walk to Emmaus or La Caminata a Emaús from Luke 24:13–35," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 2 (2023): 42.