

Pat Conover: Hope to Disappointment to Recognition to Transformation

Sermon for Seekers Church

April 14, 2002

Pat Conover

Hope to Disappointment to Recognition to Transformation

The title of this sermon is Hope to Disappointment to Recognition to Transformation. I am going to read the Luke 24 passage again so you can listen for the four themes in sequence: hope, disappointment, recognition, transformation. Here is the story of the Road to Emmaus as presented in the Scholars Translation of the Five Gospels.

Now, that same day two of them were traveling to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were engaged in conversation about all that had taken place. It so happened, during the course of their discussion, that Jesus himself approached and began to walk along with them. However, they could not recognize him.

He said to them, "What were you discussing as you walked along?"

Then they paused, looking depressed. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened these last few days?"

He said to them, "What are you talking about?"

Then they said to him, "About Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people, and about how our ranking priests and rulers turned him in to be sentenced to death, and crucified him. We were hoping that he would be the one who was going to ransom Israel. As if this were not enough, it has been three days now since all this happened. Meanwhile, some women from our group gave us quite a shock. They were at the tomb early this morning and did not find his body. They came back claiming even to have seen a vision of heavenly messengers, who said that he was alive. Some of those with us went to the tomb and found it exactly as the women had described; but nobody saw him.

He said to them, "You people are so slow-witted, so reluctant to trust everything the prophets have said! Was not the Anointed One destined to undergo these things and enter into his glory?" Then starting with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted every passage of scripture that referred to himself.

When they had gotten close to the village to which they were going, and he acted as if he were going on. However, they entreated him saying, "Stay with us, it's almost evening, the day is practically over." Therefore, he went in to stay with them.

Therefore, as soon as he took his place at table with them, he took a loaf, and gave a blessing, broke it, and started passing it out to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, and explaining the scripture to us? Therefore, they got up at once and returned to Jerusalem.

The story of the road to Emmaus may not be historical as we

measure by objective fact, but it is critically historical as a memory of the unfolding of the understanding that Jesus is our Christ. Jesus could not have become the savior, the Christ, unless there had been followers like Cleopas and his companions. You cannot have a savior unless someone is saved.

We do not know anything about Cleopas except what we learn in this story. He had a gentile name and he carried the Jewish longing for the Messiah.

Here is the brief story of Cleopas. Like many Jews, he was waiting and hoping for the Messiah and he thought about the Messiah in revolutionary political terms. He longed for the establishment of an independent Jewish nation and not merely a protectorate run by the Herods on behalf of Rome. It was the same hope that had led to several violent rebellions and that led to another violent rebellion 30 years after Jesus, a rebellion that brought the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem and the genocide of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Presumably, the Zealots and those focused on revolution were mostly killed off and that is why we do not know very much about that part of the Jewish movements of the 1st century. Cleopas was carrying the kind of hope that had made Jesus dangerous to the Temple authorities and to Rome.

Cleopas was carrying a dangerous hope and he was disappointed. Jesus was dead. The power of the Temple and of Rome had been made manifest in the most direct kind of way. The disappointment of Cleopas is critical to this story. He was so disappointed he could not recognize Jesus, could not understand the way in which Jesus was alive, could not re-gather with the disciples to get on with what was new.

When Cleopas shared his disappointment, when he got it up on the table, some of the grief could be released. Then he turned a critical corner and became able to recognize the living Christ. Then he could contribute to building a new community that the Temple and Rome could not block.

In this process, Cleopas moved from living before the revolution to living after the revolution, from waiting to action, from disappointment and defeat to joy and solidarity. After the revolution of Jesus, we learn that nothing else is needed before we can get on with living in the realm of God. The time of recognition and decision is always now. This is what we mean when we say that Jesus is the center and meaning of history, the Christ. The ways in which Jesus mattered the most had not been taken away by his death. The story of Cleopas is the story of moving from hope to disappointment, to recognition, to transformation. The transformation released the power that the Temple and Rome could not defeat, could not defeat even with crucifixion and genocide.

Another way to see this same truth is to see that the Christmas and the Easter stories are the same. Herod threatened Jesus. Herod wanted to kill anyone claiming to be the Messiah and stop the rebellions. Herod was playing out the logic of his role as a political intermediary who was trying to protect his people. He finally did kill Jesus with the help of the Romans whose interest he served. Nevertheless, he lost. Herod could not see what Jesus could see. Then Cleopas saw it too.

It is a nice story. It is a sweet story if you think it is about life after death in which everything is somehow made all right. It is a great story, but not quite so sweet, if you think about the same path in your own story or in the life of Seekers.

Let us begin with the hope problem. We usually think of hope as a good thing. Usually Christian sermons affirm hope and promote hope. This sermon sees hope as a problem. The problem is that hope can be distracting, can take your mind off the current predicaments. It can make you sensitized to the wrong things. Cleopas thought he knew what a Messiah is, thought he had read the job description. He was not alone. Judas was a Zealot and his feelings of betrayal by Jesus may have led to

his betrayal of Jesus. Hope can be dangerous. Disappointing your followers after raising their hopes can be dangerous.

The disappointment of Cleopas was a corrective to his hope. However, the disappointment, by itself, led to dispersal and confusion. The disappointment, in turn, had to be corrected by recognition, a recognition that recovered the hope with fresh insight into the depths from which the hope comes.

One standard story line for many of us in Seekers is that we started our spiritual journeys with some hope about Jesus and Christianity. Then we became disappointed when he hit the wall of recognizing the inadequacy of tooth fairy and Santa Claus theology. What is the recognition we need to re-gather the depths of our hope?

The story of Cleopas is clear that the recognition cannot come merely from a proper understanding of scripture. Jesus himself interpreted the scripture to Cleopas and, even though his heart burned, he did not get it. Nevertheless, Jesus had become important to Cleopas and he and his companions urged him to stay instead of leaving them and going on. Finally, in the breaking of the bread, Jesus was recognized. This makes such a nice communion meditation.

It is not communion Sunday so I guess we will have to press on with the story. It was after the breaking of the bread that Cleopas and his companions could talk about and appreciate the sharing of scripture. This insight is at the core of the way Seekers does its School of Christian Living, and it is no accident that many of us turned corners with recognitions we gained during School of Christian Living classes.

In the breaking of the bread, in the feeding of each other's hungers and in telling each other where the bread is to be found, we can hear scripture as it matters here and now. Then we can hear the scripture than engages our lives instead of sliding off into speculation. Then we have a company that can

hold and carry the truths that are more than we carry by ourselves.

I am not talking about truth as information. I am not talking about truth that is too heavy to carry by a single person. I am talking about living into the truth of transformed relationships – the sharing of truths that require mutuality – that require the mutuality of deep sharing and deep hearing, about truth that makes you forever different because you are linked in love to one another. You cannot put it down because it is just too precious.

Cleopas was part of the company of Jesus and it did not matter that Jesus disappeared. Cleopas had what he needed to have, companions who understood what he understood, who were changed as he was changed.

They know just what to do. They headed back to Jerusalem, back to where the power of the Temple and Rome was most intense, back to the danger, back to the opportunity to re-gather the larger community, back to getting on with the tasks given by God.

So what are the hopes and disappointments you are working with? What do you need to release into trust and recognition? From whom do you need a hug? Who do you need to hug?

However, you cannot live just with hugging. It is indispensable, but it is so sweet just because we have recognized each other as part of a company that is willing to pick up the work that Jesus has given to us. The work is so daunting that we know we need each other. The work is so daunting that raw individualism is silly. The work is so dangerous that we need whatever limited protections we can get from each other. The work is sometimes so full of joy that we need great big cups to hold it all.

We have gotten once again to our core theme of gifts and callings. This is not a special theme of Seekers. It's part of

the core salvation story. Our gifts and callings provide a sense of meaning that overcome the most basic of existential challenges. Our gifts and callings mean we do not have to be hung up with accumulation or with the denial of diminishment and death. Our gifts and calling give us our true names and help us find each other. We are saved from the oppressions of guilt, meaninglessness and death. We are saved from confusion, anonymity and alienation.

Our common worship helps us appreciate God acting in the midst of our lives, challenging our hopes, giving us the gifts of disappointment, and luring us to recognition and joy. Nevertheless, we have to follow Cleopas back to Jerusalem or everything slips away. We cannot hide out in Emmaus.

We are turning that corner in Seekers these days. Therefore, I tell you that the true name for this story is not the Road to Emmaus but the Road to Jerusalem.

The challenge is that we all have to go back to Jerusalem. We do not all have to do the same things when we get there, but we have to go there together. Some of us know what our gifts and callings are, both individual callings and callings within the community. We need to support each other for full productivity. That is accountability, a welcome gift. Some of us are discerning our gifts and callings, or doing it all over again. We need space and support.

Some of us need to hide out a bit while we are getting it together. It just matters that we are hiding together in Jerusalem and not escaping or dispersing.

Some of us are worried that our gifts and callings are not much seen within the community because we are laying them down out in Jerusalem. Some are worried that their gifts and callings do not take them outside into Jerusalem. Outside or inside, singly or in teams, we find each other in the integrity of breaking bread, in the deep listening that leads

to recognition and leads to the risking of the Road to Jerusalem.

My spiritual reading is that the time is coming for much more of the collective energy of Seekers to be focused in the outward journey. Jeanne, Peter and I are gathering to pray our way toward the possible development of a mission group of interpretation and evangelism. I have heard others talking about healing ministries and about direct service volunteer ministries. There is ferment about environmental concerns. Maybe the moment is coming for a deeper and common engagement of our advocacy concerns. Some are caring more about Takoma and Takoma Park. I am excited about the possibility of an urban retreat center. Let the grapes ferment. Let the yeast do its thing. Let us give each other the space and flexibility, the hope and the recognitions, so that things we cannot even dream yet will start growing.

I look forward to meeting you on the road – to Jerusalem.