

“This Is Us: Our Future Together”
Luke 24:13-35

When we look at the problems and challenges of our lives or our world today, sometimes they seem daunting and impossible to solve. Therefore, the future may seem hopeless. Our past hurts or losses and our present difficulties may overwhelm our sense of efficacy and hope for transformation. In the show, “This Is Us” we see this kind of fear of the future played out in many ways. Even as the audience last February when we learned how Jack died, we felt the depth of loss because it spoke to something deep within us about our own losses in life. This scene we are about to watch shows the depth of human loss and tragedy: Jack’s death scene:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI09Hxv-Vfo>

How do we move forward into the future with hope when there is unresolved grief, hurt, and a lingering sense of fear of future losses and failures?

This was what the disciples had to face after the death of Jesus after he was crucified by the Romans. In today’s Bible story we get a glimpse into the fear and pain of two of the followers of Jesus after his death and how they struggled to move into the future. They had heard the witness of the women about the resurrection of Jesus, but fear and despair had gripped their hearts and minds so tightly that they could not see beyond the execution of Jesus. Their political and religious hopes were crushed by his death. He was supposed to liberate Israel from its occupiers, but he got killed. Despair was the mood of the day! They could not see any hope for the future of the mission of Jesus. This was the end as far as they were concerned and the only option they could see was to leave Jerusalem. The words of the women they had heard about seeing Jesus seemed like foolishness, a fantasy that could not be trusted. They had no reason for staying in Jerusalem any more. They wanted to run away. And because of their deep grief and sense of despair, when Jesus appeared to them, they didn’t recognize him at all! They witnessed the events in Jerusalem but didn’t really understand them. So, Jesus walks and talks with them to help them understand what happened, but they don’t recognize him. This is a puzzling piece for many biblical scholars. If the disciples knew Jesus, how could they not have recognized him? We can get stuck trying to explain the details of the story or why and how this could have happened or not even happened, but the message here for us is about something deeper. Cleopas and his walking companion had been with Jesus for many hours before they knew who he was. Even at a good walking clip, and allowing for some brief breaks, the journey between Jerusalem and Emmaus, which is estimated to be seven miles long, will take a good three hours. We are told that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Why do you think they were not able to recognize him? What was stopping their hope? Could it have been their severe sense of loss? Could it have been their fear of being next to die? Could it have been their inability to connect with the stranger on a heart level? We see similar reactions among the characters of “This Is Us”: Denial, fear, isolation, lack of direction, hiding from life, control, etc.

Yet, while the eyes and minds of the two disciples didn’t recognize Jesus, their hearts knew him. But they didn’t listen to their hearts. Their pain was too fresh and too strong

for them to listen to their hearts. Many of us can identify with this experience of having known or felt something in our hearts, but only to dismiss it because it was not logical or because our feelings of isolation or pain were too powerful. They didn't recognize him until they shared the meal together.

The meal was a key moment of hope because it was a place so familiar to their hearts and bodies that their minds finally caught up with what was happening to them. Hope was already within them, they just seemed to have no way of accessing it. There were many blocks between their hearts and their minds. What Jesus did with them was help them to get in touch with that hope. He did not come back to live in their midst to continue to lead them. This was the only way they thought they could move forward. What he did instead was to empower them to look within their hearts. This is what Jesus had taught the disciples while he was alive, but the lesson was hard to get. Listen to what he said to them in Luke 17:20-21 (screen) "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." If we are to look into the future with hope, we have to look inside. God has already given us that gift, our work is to remove the obstacles that hinder our ability to trust, to innovate, and to let go of fear. I recently saw this quote on Facebook: You are being presented two choices: Evolve or repeat.

The work of faith is to adapt and to continue to grow, but not just for the sake of looking good or being with it, but for the sake of being faithful to that deep and abiding presence of God in our hearts which continues to move us into better futures. In his book *The Agile Church*, Dwight Zscheile tells about an important concept that I think could translate into our daily lives. It is called "Positive Deviance" Which is about the idea that the solutions we need for our future together are already within us or within our communities, but we just have not learned to access them. Here is an example of what he means. "In rural Vietnam the malnutrition rate for children reached 65 percent by 1990. Typically, addressing this challenge would have involved governments or aid organizations importing massive amounts of resources -food and money- alongside experts with plans, projects and techniques. But infusions of outside resources tend to turn local people into passive, dependent recipients. Moreover, the political situation at the time disallowed that. Instead, the nonprofit organization Save the Children sent a couple of workers into the country. Due to hostility from government officials facing an economic embargo by the United States at the time, they were given six months-hardly long enough to make an impact, it would seem. The workers could only look within the local communities for solutions, and that is precisely what they did. They mobilized villages to look in their own midst for children who were not malnourished -the positive deviants. And they found them. These families were living under the same circumstances as everyone else, but somehow their children managed to be healthier. So the workers invited local people to observe carefully how those positive deviant families went about their days. Fairly quickly, they identified simple practices that separated these families from the rest of the village -practices like including tiny shrimp or crabs from the rice paddies in children's meals, stricter hygiene, and more frequent mealtimes. These practices were then shared by the villagers with one another. Once adopted, the malnutrition rate in that village would drop precipitously...Notice in the

positive deviance approach that the answers are already present amidst regular people.” The conclusion is that there are three simple principles to Positive Deviance:

1. Solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist
2. They have been discovered by members of the community itself
3. These innovators (individual positive deviants) have succeeded even though they share the same constraints as everyone else.

We are going to discuss this together: How might we use these principles for our future together both on individual and communal levels? How do these principles connect to our faith and how the kingdom of God is already present in our midst?

We will end with a scene from “This Is Us” with Kevin (one of the triplets of the Pearson Family) struggling before his big play in New York. It was the opening night and he was super nervous and did not know what to do to find calm. He went from one person to another to get good advice and the best advice he got was from his step-father who tells him to remember what his father would do if he was in his shoes. The surprising thing that happens when Kevin focuses on his heart to do what his father would do is that instead of going on stage, Kevin goes to help his brother Randall who was having a nervous breakdown. Only when Kevin was able to access his heart was he able to do the right thing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEsu-bOzqAs>

When the path ahead is not clear, and the future is seeming challenging or overwhelming, I pray that you can open your heart and listen to the one who resides there with you in love. Amen.