

What Should Have Been
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
Luke 24:13-35
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In 1991, the Atlanta Braves were supposed to win the World Series. But Kent Hrbek is a cheater. That's right, he's a cheater! He pulled Ron Gant off of first base. Just do a Google search. You'll see. As a matter of fact, it's the first thing that will pop up. Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm sure Mr. Hrbek's a nice person. But he's still a cheater. And also, the Minnesota Twins played in the Metro Dome, a domed stadium, and it's a known fact that the maintenance crew would turn on the blowers in the outfield to manipulate field conditions. In the top of the inning, when the visiting team batted, the air blew in. In the bottom of the inning, when the home team batted, the air blew out. Those friendly winds helped Kirby Puckett's lazy fly ball turn into a walk-off, game-winning homer in Game Six. The Twins would go on to win the World Series the next night in Game Seven.

That wasn't supposed to happen. My brothers and I were supposed to have a post-game party in our living room, huddled around a 19-inch television. Instead, the next day, we went to school bleary-eyed, and I can assure you, I retained zero knowledge in geometry class. And twenty-six years later, it still doesn't seem fair.

I was supposed to get an A on my first Calculus test at Furman. I got a 44. And that was actually one of the better test results of the semester. That's not how college was supposed to start.

In a recent election, one I was really invested in, candidate X was supposed to win. She didn't. Candidate Y won. And I still believe Selena Meyer would have been a much better president than Stuart Hughes. Ha! See what I did there? That was a *Veep* joke.

If you live long enough, or should I say, if you live lively enough, there will come a time when you invest yourself wholly and fully into something: a job, a test, an interview, a relationship, an election, a cause, an organization, a career, a path...And at some point, the investment you put in will not deliver the expectation you imagined. You imagine Future A: a victory parade; monies not-yet-earned, but already spent in one's mind; the perfect, happy ending to a story: sunsets and true love and neat, little containers of goodness. But Future A doesn't materialize: no victory parade; window shopping remains just that; and messy, tangled endings, with pain and anxiety and grief and disappointment.

I don't mean to minimize the pain and disillusionment the disciples must have felt on that first Easter weekend by comparing their feelings to a lost game, or election, or test score. But maybe those feelings help us understand, even in a marginal way, the plight of those two men walking the Road to Emmaus.

Just 48 hours ago, twelve disciples (not to mention the countless unnamed disciples), were following in the footsteps of Jesus. For nearly three years, they had seen God at work: healing, teaching, loving, lingering through the Galilee. Here was a man who stilled the sea; who helped blind persons see; who made God and God's word accessible to everyone; who trusted wholly and fully in the security God would provide; who never seemed anxious; who never seem flustered; a man, who when they were in his presence they just knew that everything would be okay. In the presence of Jesus, the disciples floated through tumultuous times, and they dreamed of God's world breaking into the present.

And then. A trial. A crucifixion. A death. And pain. And grief. And Sabbath. And now today – the tomorrow they didn't want to see. A bleak, hopeless tomorrow. A monotonous tomorrow. A present, and a future that wasn't supposed to feel like this. Jesus was going to make us fishers of people. But now, we're just plain old fishermen again.

And the two men put one foot in front of the other. They walk the seven long miles to the horizon of their monotonous future: Emmaus. Another map dot. Another life of labor and poverty. Another could-a-been story.

But a funny thing happens on the way to Emmaus. Cleopas and his buddy meet a stranger – a stranger who seems aloof – this stranger has not heard the story of Jesus. So they tell him the story. And then, the stranger tells them a story. He recounts the stories of the prophets from Moses on through the ages. And it's like time stops. The disciples drink up his teachings, so much so that they hardly notice they've walked seven miles. It's like they've swallowed a good novel – the words have their full attention. They are all that matters.

And Emmaus is no longer on the horizon. It's in front of them. And it's dark. And it's time for supper. And they say, "Let's continue this conversation over dinner."

At the table, the stranger breaks bread, and blesses it, and Cleopas, and his buddy, and all the others know: Jesus lives.

I can't explain it. I won't it explain it. Somehow, somehow, Jesus showed us that the power of God dwells in the hospitality of others. Somehow, somehow, there is magic at a table. For when we break bread, something transports us to a plane where we recognize the divine. Our memories leap out at us, and we find the common, but extraordinary humanity in one another. The bread and the wine that we share isn't magic, but it has a magical quality. It helps us to realize our value. In the breaking of bread, these disciples realized that their three-year adventure had not been in vain. Their experiences had opened them to God's possibilities. Their experiences had helped them to hear God's word in new ways. And their experiences had taught them a sense hospitality that rekindles the spirit of God each time it is shared.

But there's something else. Christ's appearance at Emmaus was a reminder to the disciples that their future would not be held captive to the expectations of this world. This world told them that death was inevitable, that Rome's power was inevitable, that zero-sum-gain outcomes are inevitable. Christ's reappearance shatters such worldly knowledge. God tells the disciples, and you and me as well:

"I am with you. I am in your future. And mine is not a world based on winning or losing and succeeding or failing. Mine is a world based on enough-ness. And grace. And community. And a table that's big enough to change your perspectives, and your perceptions, and your expectations."

You know it's funny. In 1995, I met three friends on my freshmen hall at Furman, one from Georgia, one from Rhode Island, and one from South Carolina. We were strangers, but one day in the cafeteria, we talked about a ball game over lunch. Game six of the 1991 World Series to be exact. We lamented our doomed fate: Oh to be a Braves fan!!! Three months later, now fast friends, we huddled around another 19-inch TV in a cabin in Edgefield, South Carolina. And we watched the Braves win their first and only World Series. And each April since, those of us who are able attend opening day in person, and of

course, the others text the ones who can't. And we chatter optimistically about what another season will hold, not just for a ball team, but for each of us. All because of a table.

And sometimes, when I'm working through an especially difficult passage, and wondering how in the world it will become a sermon, I think back to another table in the Duke Library at Furman. A study group of four friends cranking out the answers to Calculus problems over coffee and Krispy Kreme doughnuts. And I'm pretty sure, I didn't anticipate the future of a D-plus (my proudest academic accomplishment!), but what a future! For it was that D-plus that taught me how to learn and to think and to do better. And it was that D-plus that reminded me I could. All because of a table.

And what of all those losing candidates and their supporters? Well somewhere, a group of them are at a table. I like to think that table also includes their opponents. And over a meal, they are asking questions, and listening, and getting to know one another. They didn't get the future they expected, but perhaps now they are working for what the future can be. And the future will be bright. All because of a table.

Friends, Emmaus lies ahead. It may be seven miles, or seven years, or seven sentences to form a paragraph. As you travel that road, remember to share the story. And when you get there, don't forget to sit, and rest, and enjoy a table. For it's a table that your future – God's future, God's bright future – will be revealed. The bread that God provides may not be able to erase your pain, or your grief, or your disappointment over present circumstances. But that bread is a reminder that your present circumstance is NOT, IT IS NOT, IT IS NOT, IT IS NOT, IT IS NOT the final word. God is the final word. And God is working, always working, to resurrect your Emmaus: your possibilities, your goodness, your humanity, your tomorrow, your future. Just grab a seat at the table, and you will see that what SHOULD HAVE BEEN will one day BE.

May it so. And may it be soon.

Amen.