

WE HAD HOPED

Acts 2:14a,36-41 Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17 1 Peter 1:17-23 Luke 24:13-35

Easter 3A – May 8, 2011

Christ Episcopal Church

Poughkeepsie, New York

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We had hoped, Cleopas and his friend told the stranger walking along beside them on the no-doubt dusty road between Jerusalem & Emmaus.

We had hoped that this Jesus who we followed for all those years would redeem Israel. On the late afternoon of Easter Day, according to Luke's account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Cleopas and his friend were leaving town. Leaving Jerusalem – probably to go back home. Sad, frightened, confused, shattered – and hopeless.

We had hoped, they said.

Each one of us probably has our own stories of lost hope.

We had hoped that there would have been no war.

We had hoped that the chemo would have worked, and that the cancer had not come back.

We had hoped that the economy would have recovered and that a raise and promotion were on hand, instead of a pink slip.

All of us have our own 'we had hoped' moments within the story of our lives.

A moment of shattered hope interrupted my life, on the morning of November 12 in 1997 when I awoke to a phone call at about four o'clock in the morning.

I was living in Tunis, the capital of the Tunisia, at the time, when I worked for Union Texas Petroleum, managing the office that supported our drilling operations in the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert.

No one likes to get phone calls at four o'clock in the morning. We did not have a drilling rig in either the Med or the Sahara that month – so my mind didn't leap to the safety of all the men who lived and worked on those rigs. Their safety was a huge concern when operations were underway.

Our drilling operations in the Sahara near the city of Tataouine were literally within sight of a Libyan national guard installation at a border crossing. One wrong turn at a track in the desert and you could end up in Libya in about 15 minutes. Drilling on the Tunisian/Libyan border was always a dicey operation.

And whenever an offshore rig is under operation, especially in the Mediterranean – with its extremely stormy & unstable weather patterns – you live by the telephone, hoping that it won't ring with bad news from the rig or a boat. But we weren't drilling at the moment.

So my heart was in my throat when the phone rang, fearing that it was a call from Oklahoma, with bad news from my family. But instead it was from the American Embassy.

They told me to get to a television and watch the news. Five of our company employees had just been killed in Karachi, Pakistan. We later learned that a trial had come to a close in America just the day before, convicting a Pakistani who had admitted killing two CIA employees in Virginia. It was presumed that the murder of our employees was in retaliation for that conviction.

As we talked on the phone, the Embassy didn't know who had been killed – they just told me to get to the TV – and then they had to ring off, in order get in touch with all of the other Americans in Tunis and give them the news and advise them to stay home that day.

After I turned on CNN I sat in shock for a long time when I realized that one of the men killed had been a guest in my home there in Tunis for the past week.

Larry Jennings had been in our office to conduct the annual audit. I had driven him to the airport the day before and put him on the plane to Karachi. Also killed were Ephraim Egbu, Joel Enlow, and Tracy Ritchie. They had been traveling from their hotel in Karachi – the same hotel where I had lived in Karachi ten years before. On their way to the company office early in the morning, their car was ambushed on the streets of Karachi. They and their driver, Anwar Murza, were all killed in a matter of seconds. Anwar had been one of the drivers that got me safely through the busy

and dangerous streets of Karachi when I had lived and worked there.

I didn't recognize Anwar's name when I first heard it on the news. But later I experienced the horror of seeing pictures in the Pakistani press. I recognized Anwar when I saw the picture of him slumped over the steering wheel in the car. Anyone who thinks they need to see pictures of Osama Bin Laden's body has never seen pictures of their friends' bodies after they had been machine-gunned to death.

Once I got over my shock, I called the head of our corporate security office, who told me to close the office, batten down the hatches, and lie low until further notice. So about five o'clock in the morning I got all of the company cars moved in off the street and squeezed behind the gates of my house and the office – and got a screwdriver and took down all of the signs with the company name, and all the street numbers off of our buildings, and even the name of the street at the corner.

When the staff arrived that morning, I gathered them into the conference room and told them what had happened. We shared a long period of grief and shattered hope that morning. Not only had Larry been in Tunis with us for the week just past – over the course of my tenure in Tunis, Ephraim, Joel, and Tracy had each been to Tunis, at least once. Every person on our staff knew all four of the guys from Houston that had been killed.

I was the only American from Union Texas who lived in Tunis. But Leila, Mohammad, and Sihem – the staff members who were fluent in English – were shocked and embarrassed and scared, that it had apparently been Muslims

who had acted so cruelly against completely innocent individuals.

They – and all of the Muslims with whom I had become friends in Tunisia – had hoped for a better world – a world where the Muslim-dominant countries & the West could grow together in mutual trust and enjoy mutual prosperity. They feared that hope would begin to crumble before their eyes.

I and my fellow employees at Union Texas had hoped that we could be the type of company where the 'Houston' staff and the various 'national' staffs of our international operations could work together through personal relationships grounded in integrity and respect for each other. We were engaged in just such relationships around the world.

But how could that work prosper and those relationships continue to grow and mature – if outside forces of terror and extremism could shatter the lives of so many innocent people – in the blink of an eye?

That was in November of 1997.

Little did we know what the world was headed towards in September of 2001, when the hope of so many thousands of people was fractured.

Little did we know that in the ten years since, there was no exit strategy that anticipated the broken hope of the thousands of people in the families of our armed forces who have died, or been severely injured in body and mind and spirit in the wars that seem to have no end.

Little did we know that there was no forward planning for the scattered hope of the

hundreds of thousands of God's innocent children in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, who have been killed, maimed, or displaced since then.

And now, Osama bin Laden is dead.

Personally, I'm glad that whatever influence bin Laden might have had over al-Qaeda is over. I hope that these past few months that he watched the news. The news of the 'Arab Spring' that is sweeping through North Africa and the Middle East. A Spring of renewal and hope that is in direct contradiction to the hate and terror that bin Laden inspired.

Young people – including many, many women – creating change in their societies. Change that seeks more freedom and more respect for every human being – not at all the type of society that bin Laden and al-Qaeda were seeking.

I hope that bin Laden realized that his philosophy and his tactics were rejected and had failed – precisely within his own faith and culture.

But I can't celebrate his death.

When we use violence as a tool or as a means to extract vengeance – and then call it justice – we are being told a lie. It sadly brings to mind George Orwell and his novel *1984*.

I'm afraid that in the years to come we will look back at this moment, and see this as a time when we could have taken an honest assessment of our society – our motivations, our goals, and our actions. I fear that as a society, we will not undertake that hard and difficult work. I'm sad about that, and I'm

more than a little frightened about that.

All of us have moments within the story of our lives when it seems that we have lost hope. This morning, I've told you of one moment of in my life when hope seemed to have been lost. When the hope of my friends in Tunisia seemed to die before their eyes.

Fourteen years later those folks in Tunisia have new reasons to hope for a better, stable, more mature society for themselves and for their children.

Even if perhaps we cannot individually influence the great broad trends of our society, we can see to our own hearts, our own souls, and our own minds. I invite you to find your own, deepest, most personal 'we had hoped' story.

And then, take a deep breath, and step out onto the road to Emmaus.

See who walks up beside you.

Be on the lookout for the unexpected stranger. Someone in our lives who might have something to tell us.

Or maybe someone who is just patient with us. Someone who listens. Listens to our questions. Someone who doesn't mind if we get confused. Someone who can help keep us on track of where we are going.

Watch for an invitation – especially at those thin times in our lives when it feels so much like it is almost evening and the day is nearly done.

Be ready to see those times in our lives – not just here on Sunday mornings – but at other times in our lives, when the bread of heaven is offered, blessed, broken & given in your presence.

Cleopas and his friend thought that hope was dead. After all, Jesus had been the source and fount of their hope. They had seen him crucified on the cross, and dead in the tomb.

As it turns out, they were wrong.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.