But we had hoped. Someone once said that these are the saddest words in the Bible.

It is Easter evening. Two disciples trudge down the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Their hearts are heavy, and their steps are too. Between bouts of silent mourning, they speak with one another of the things they have heard and witnessed. An arrest. A crucifixion. A death. The one they had followed, the one in whom they had put their hopes had been placed in a tomb.

A stranger joins them on the road. They acknowledge his presence, but continue their conversation. At last, the stranger breaks in. “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They come to a halt, their sad eyes betraying their grief. One finally speaks. “You mean you don’t know? The whole city has been in an uproar. How can you not have heard the things that have happened?” The stranger responds, “What things?” Perplexed, the disciples continue. “The things about Jesus of Nazareth. Have you never heard of him? He was a prophet, a man of power, someone whose words and deeds were mighty before God and before all the people. But the chief priests and the leaders of the people arrested him and handed him over to the Romans and they crucified him.” Then they uttered those sad words, perhaps the saddest words in the Bible. “But we had hoped. We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel.”

How often have we uttered such words, or some like them? We formulate our best laid plans. We dream about the course of our lives. We put our hopes in what is to come, in those who might accompany us in their accomplishment, in fulfilling our deepest desires. Yet too often things go awry. We hope for a long life together, but tragedy strikes, and we are left alone. We hope for our health and well-being, but disease invades us and we are left fighting for our lives. We hope for good things for those around us, but we see too much heartache, too much pain, too much despair. But we had hoped.

The two disciples continue their story, one with an amazing and troubling surprise. “Some women astounded us. They had gone to the tomb, but the body was gone. Nowhere. Nothing. What they did see was two angels who told them that Jesus was alive, that he had been raised. When some of the others who had followed him went back to the tomb, they found it just as the women had said. He was not there.”

Sometimes when our hopes have been dashed, it is impossible to believe that any good might come. Even when the promise is right there before our eyes, we cannot see it. And really, how can you? The women go to the tomb to anoint a dead body. They still bear the weight of their loss. They could never have imagined that the tomb would be empty. They couldn’t have believed that two angels would say to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” Is it possible in the midst of our grief to believe that there could be new life?

The stranger is less than kind as the disciples finish their story. “How foolish you are! How slow of heart! Don’t you believe the scriptures? The prophets have been saying all along that the Messiah must suffer before entering his glory.” The stranger continues with a litany of all that had been said about him in Moses and the prophets.

It is often easy enough to forget the promise and the comfort that the message of God can bring us when our hopes seem abandoned. They can seem as though they are empty, nothing but mere platitudes. If God really loves us, why did God let this happen? If God’s intentions are for life, why do we see so much death? Sometimes others may try to console us, but often their words feel hollow and unhelpful. We find no peace. But we had hoped.

The disciples and the stranger at last reach Emmaus. The stranger appears to continue his journey, but the disciples urge him to stay with them. As they sit at the table, the stranger offers a blessing for their meal and breaks the bread. As they receive it, suddenly their eyes are opened. They see the stranger for who he is. It is Jesus! Then just as suddenly as he had appeared to them on the road, he vanishes. The disciples recall what Jesus had told them on the road. “Were not our hearts burning as he spoke to us? How could we not have recognized him?” And dashing back to Jerusalem, the disciples rush to share the good news with the others.

There will come those times when it seems our hopes are lost that suddenly the light shines again. Words of grace that had previously gone unheard burst in, giving us new life and new hope. New opportunities emerge to remind us that God is indeed gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God’s love reaches out to us, bringing healing from the wounds of our shattered hopes. Jesus offers himself to us, his body and his blood, just as he did on the night in which he was betrayed, just as he did to the mournful disciples in Emmaus. His real presence in the bread and in the wine assures us that hope is never truly lost, that the gift of Jesus himself can empower us to continue our journey of faith and life in confidence that the risen Christ accompanies us on the road.

When the disciples arrive in Jerusalem and find the eleven and their companions, they receive affirmation that what they had heard and seen was true. “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” In the community of faith, we find the assurance that our living Lord continues to walk with us every day, whether we walk in the brightness of his light or in the valley of the shadow of death. Our task as the body of Christ is to witness to one another and to the world that Christ is risen; he is risen indeed! And in that witness we receive the promise God spoke so long ago through the prophet Jeremiah, “You know the plans that I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”