

Sunday, April 7, 2024
1 John 1:1-2:1; Luke 24:13-35
“Let’s Go For a Walk”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

So, again, thanks for coming back to hear the rest of the story of what happened on that Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday. So the one thing we found out last week, looking at all of the Gospel versions of the Easter story is that no one believes the good news of Jesus’ resurrection when they first hear it. No one. And that includes Jesus’ own close disciples! And today we are in the gospel of Luke so let’s recall Luke’s version of what happened first thing in the morning on Easter Sunday. In the Gospel of Luke, several women go to the tomb and saw angels who told them Jesus had risen, but the disciples dismiss the testimony of the women as an “idle tale”. In fact, as one pastor writes, “Actually, that’s not what Luke tells us, that’s the water-downed translation we’re used to. The Greek word Luke employs – *leros* – is the root of the word delirious. So in response to the testimony of the women, the disciples say they are out of their freakin’ minds. Nice. But perhaps expected. You see, here’s the thing: the earth is generally unwilling to cough up the dead. And testimony that it has – that one who died has actually been raised – kind of upsets the natural order and causes you to lose confidence in pretty much everything you thought you could count on. Two things, Benjamin Franklin once wrote to a friend, are certain in the world: death and taxes. Except, according to these women, not death.” (1) Think about it, if the resurrection really was true, well then, there went life as they knew it.

So it is now afternoon and our passage in Luke involves a walk, a walk on the road to Emmaus. This passage always reminds me of worship. Think about it. Two travelers are met on the road - - the scriptures are opened to them - - they share a meal, and the identity and presence of Christ is revealed - - and they are sent to share and live the good news. Worship too – involves two or more gathering – the Word of God spoken - the breaking of the bread, fellowship – and a sending out.

So two disciples, or followers of Jesus are on the road leaving Jerusalem and are heading back home to Emmaus. A person whom they do not recognize appears on the road with them as they are deep in discussion about all that has just happened. Even though Jesus said he would be raised from the dead, the women attest to this, complete with seeing angels, they still question all this. Why didn’t they just believe? Maybe because rejection is easier than resurrection. Life here and now is hard enough to understand, but being resurrection people takes huge belief, great understanding, and effort, a lot of effort. Denial is much easier than the truth – dead is dead but risen – that’s crazy. That makes everything change!

So when this stranger asks what they are talking about - at first the travelers are incredulous – are you kidding me? Where have you been? Everyone is talking about Jesus’ death. And then they say the four words that express the most heartbreaking and realistic points in scripture. “But we had hoped”. As another pastor writes, “In this unguarded moment, the walking disciples give voice to a discovery that every adult shares: very often, often when it matters most, we find ourselves speaking of matters of hope and faith in the imperfect tense”. (2) “But we had hoped”. Honest recognition of the reality of deep disappointment.

They had trusted, they had loved, they had seen miracles of healing, of calming troubled spirits, of inclusion of those excluded, of stories that had the power to change everything. They walked in mourning, in shock, confusion, afraid, lost. They had followed this man all the way to the cross. They had seen him die. It's not just the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but the gaping hole of all that could have happened but won't. That's real loss. Grieving a future that may never be. "But we had hoped." We have all said these words.

I have heard families use this phrase, "we had hoped" when addictions return, cancer is back, the depression is worse, the divorce is final, or jobs go away, we enter into that moment of deep disappointment. We like to hear, we love to hear, future tenses. We like it when people say that everything will be okay, life goes on, we love to hear people say, just hang in there. We like future tenses so much that we reward people in deep grief when they reassure us by saying, "I'll get through this, don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

When we live in a place of mourning and grief, confusion and uncertainty, we must be free to give that loss a voice, knowing a presence walks on the road with us. Having worked with groups similar to our Grief Share Group, I know what it is like to watch people learn to walk together in a very unfamiliar new world, to express what was lost and move into the new, not forgetting the past, moving forward onto a new road.

This past week I traveled by train to New York City to spend time with my daughter and her wife and her sister. It's a long ride so I got caught up on some interesting reading about the church. This church, this congregation is also on a road, walking a path with Jesus. A road that is changing a great deal. So many changes through events in history like the pandemic, so many changes in our society like technology, so many changes in all of us like the use of social media, have greatly changed the church.

Now the phrase I hear actually way too much around here is "we used to." We used to have, we used to be, we used to do. And I get it, you are mourning the past church, and you need to embrace that loss. But I'm here to tell you every church, every single protestant church is smaller today than it was say 5 or 10 years ago. Every single one. We mourn that loss and it's okay to do so but hear this – this is one of the healthiest, largest congregations in our Presbytery which includes all Presbyterian churches in CT, RI and half of Mass (Boston has its own Presbytery).

Think about that and listen to these statics I read – 75% of Presbyterian Churches have less than 150 members. 75%. Which means most don't have full-time pastors and actually 20% of the churches have only lay leadership. And we have 2 worship services. When I tell colleagues that our 8 a.m. service sometimes has only about 30 people, they say, wow, that's great. That's all we have. And we have 3 Boards – Elders/Deacons/Trustees with 12 people serving on each! Plus 8 staff members. We need to mourn yes, but then accept, adjust to this new normal, this new road we are on and learn to celebrate where we are. Celebrate you are doing wonderful things here, Dunn's Corners! Rejoice!

Because if you don't. If you start counting, always counting the numbers, you will enter into a place of fear and fear leads to anxiety and a fearful anxious church is one stuck in that place of mourning. And a fearful anxious church who lingers in grief, will not survive. You all do so much good here and in our community. This new path that you are on, soon with a new pastor, demands the elimination of the phrase "we used to" and change it to "I wish we would" or "I'd like to see this happen here" and be willing to help make that happen.

We live in a place of confusion and uncertainty and we must be free to give that a voice, knowing a presence walks with us on that road. Because we also live in a world that is beautiful, and inspiring, and we are grateful. But before there are burning hearts, hearts filled with the living spirit ready to witness and spread a word of hope, there are broken ones. Broken hearts of disappointment which must be acknowledged. It is to these heartbroken disciples that the Risen Christ comes, walking along with them.

And after a while, Jesus can't hold it in any longer - "O how foolish you are", he says, "and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared!" God created the universe to reflect the glory of God, and all humanity to reflect the glory of God. But humanity had fallen away from God, so God came to us in person. The cross, the death wasn't a mistake - if only, but we had hoped - it was necessary for Christ to suffer and enter God's glory. It was a mystery, not a mistake. To bring heaven to earth and humans into eternity.

The road to Emmaus was a place of encounter, a place of embrace. On the road to Emmaus, there were two disciples. One was named Cleopas and the other? We don't know, maybe the other is you, or me. On that road, the road with Jesus, all our hopelessness is there on the road, every broken down dream, every doubt we have is on that road - along with so much more - for on that road there is also real hope, on that road is a revelation and the assurance of Jesus' presence in our lives which has the power to open our hearts, to a burning of the spirit.

And here's the best part, we don't need to be convinced of any of this, only invited and allowed. Invited and allowed to share our disappointments, to grieve a future that will never be, in order that we may possibly hear and receive the future God has created and God has prepared for us. And at the end of the road, at the end of the road - is communion. The mystery of the resurrection is then completely revealed in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. Where Jesus literally shows them - he broke the power of death. It is where we too encounter the living Christ.

For the next two Sunday's, known as Eastertide, we also read the letters John wrote, the Epistles. These letters were written to those early followers who were just encountering the living Christ and just beginning their faith journey. They were written specifically to be read in public and were filled with clear practical advice for Christians taking their early steps in faith. This new road, this new path, this new religion.

And the word John uses for the word, the light, is Life. Life that took the human form of Jesus, life which overcome death. They have seen it, they testify to it, so you too can believe in this new life for us all. And because of this new life, John tells them that they have a new kind of family, a new fellowship, a new community. A family that walks not in the darkness of sin, not on a path without God, lost and alone, but a family that walks in the light of life eternal. This message is for us followers as well.

As followers of Christ, we are called to be Christ's hands and feet in the world today, now, because some among us are too full of pain or fear or sorrow, that they cannot be touched by Christ, cannot feel the love of God; so why not through us? Being Christ's witnesses means sometimes sharing God's peace through prayer, listening, table fellowship, or simply being in silence with one another. Being Christ's witnesses means sometimes dancing for joy with someone, sharing in their good news, laughing, loving and sometimes feeding the hungry and feeding those who feel empty. We do not know what the future will hold, we do not always know our way on this road, we do not always know how to answer all the why's in this life, but

we do know this – we have become followers of Christ, we belong to a community, we are children of the living God.

As one pastor writes, “So often, these promises (God’s promises) are so familiar to us that we hold them far back in our head but don’t actually think about them and so don’t act as if they are true. But if it’s true that God raised Jesus from the dead . . . if it’s true that God promises to renew the whole creation and grant us new life . . . if it’s true that nothing – nothing we’ve done or has been done to us – can separate us from the love of God . . . if it’s true that God will not turn God’s back on any of us but always reaches out to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness . . . if any of this – let alone all of this – is true, then how might we live our lives this week differently? How might this faith – not knowledge, but trusting, courageous faith – change how we look at our relationships, and our politics, and our work, and our resources, and our future? And if it takes a little time to let all this sink in, to come to active trust and faith that these promises are true, well, then let’s keep in mind that we’re in good company. Jesus first disciples struggled with all this as well.” (3)

The story of Jesus may be over, but the story of the saving purpose of God is far from over and has far to go to reach its goal. For even though Jesus may not appear in our midst, his presence, his spirit is all around us, for he lives and moves and has his being within us. For we are all the new living witnesses – so, let’s act like it, let’s testify to that, let’s walk on that path, knowing, believing, Christ is with us on that road with us, each and every step of the way. May it be so, Amen.

- 1) Lose, The Rev. David. “Resurrection Doubts.” 4/15/2015.
- 2) Swanson, Richard. “Commentary on Luke 24”.
- 3) Lose, The Rev. David. “Resurrection Doubts.” 4/15/2015.