“Companions for the Journey”

Luke 24:13-35

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Today’s famous road to Emmaus text takes place on that same first Easter day when the women found the tomb to be empty and angels proclaimed that Christ had risen. At the end of today’s passage, Cleopas and his companion marvel at how Christ opened the scriptures to them that day. Let us see how the Spirit opens this passage to us *this* day.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all the things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that the was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

Doing sermon and worship prep is definitely different during a pandemic. Hymns that we might typically sing during this season are vetoed for the messages they offer; liturgies that discuss the “hustle and bustle of daily life” are rejected; commentaries are almost laugh-at-loud funny for the interpretations and insights they give.

For example, when I preached on the death of Lazarus a few weeks ago, one of the suggested hymns in our hymnal for that text was “Somebody’s Knocking at Your Door” which includes the line, “O, Sinner, why don’t you answer? Somebody’s knocking at your door.” Well that was vetoed as we try to maintain social distancing and self-isolation. And that wasn’t nearly as bad as another hymn suggested for that Sunday - Breathe on me, breath of God.

We also have been trying to pick hymns that are relatively familiar. We know it can feel weird to sing by yourself at home. On the first Sunday that we didn’t have worship, I worshipped with my home church in Durham on Live stream and sang the hymns very quietly to myself, very aware of my neighbor in the apartment above me.

John and I have found ourselves poring over the hymnal each week, wondering if we need to change any of the words to better reflect our current situation. I don’t know if you noticed, but for our closing hymn during the last few weeks of Lent, we changed the words of “Go With Us Lord and Guide Our Way” to “Be with us, Lord” — as a reminder that while we cannot *go* anywhere, at least we know that God is with us.

In preparation for this Children’s Sunday, I asked parents what their children’s favorite hymns were. Gus, one of our 10 year olds, said one of his favorite hymns was “The Trees of the Field Shall Clap Their Hands” and while I tried to re-work the hymn to say, “The trees of the field shall clap their hands as we stay home with joy,” it just didn’t feel the same. But I promise, Gus, that when we are worshiping together again, we will sing that song, and we will sing it with….forgive me, Gus-to.

Even our commentaries have provided some much needed comic relief for me as well. One that I read for this Emmaus text suggested that the preacher focus on hospitality as evangelism, and that we encourage our congregations to practice table fellowship as evangelism — that we encourage them to invite strangers and friends into their homes as a way to share the Gospel — and, I might add, germs.

I laughed at first when I read that commentary suggestion, and wanted to reject it outright, but the more I think about it, the more I think there’s some truth there. While we can’t practice physical hospitality, might this text invite us to find new ways to practice it virtually?

Because these times are strange, y’all. I feel like every time I talk to a church friend on the phone, at some point we say to ourselves and to each other — these sure are strange times.

But strange as they are, in some ways, I think this pandemic is helping us to understand a little better how the early church viewed its mission over 2000 years ago. Having to experience a new normal for a bit might help to illumine for us how important a faith community truly is.

When the women found the tomb empty that day, and as Cleopas and his companion traveled from Jerusalem to Emmaus, their normal had been turned upside down, too.

Cleopas and his friend (we don’t know who his companion was — it could be another disciple or apostle; it could be his wife), Cleopas and a companion are traveling to Emmaus, a town about 7 miles away from Jerusalem. We don’t know their purpose in traveling. Maybe they had an errand to run. Maybe there was someone in Emmaus who needed to hear about the empty tomb. Or maybe they just needed to get away; maybe they needed to go for a walk together to try to process what had happened over the past few days.

Either way, the two find themselves on the road. Suddenly, they are joined by a stranger who seemingly doesn’t know about all of the events of the past few days, if not months or even years of Jesus’s ministry. The stranger’s question - “What are you discussing with each other about?” stops Cleopas and his friend dead in their tracks. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place over these days?”

It is totally shocking to them that this stranger hadn’t heard about Christ’s death and resurrection. It’s probably similar to when we watch a television show and we see the characters hug each other or say that they’re going to a nail salon. There’s no way!

Cleopas and his friend begin to tell the stranger all that had happened. What follows is a sort of creed, reminiscent of the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed or to the one that we will say in a few minutes. However, Cleopas’ summary of Jesus’ life and death, does not conclude with any definitive statement about Christ’s resurrection.

He ends with what he knows — that the women of the group had been to the tomb early that morning, that they had seen a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was alive, and that some of the other disciples also went to the tomb and could only confirm that the body was gone. They couldn’t confirm what the angels had said about Christ’s being alive. For Cleopas and his friend, they could only report on what they knew. Their hearts couldn’t make the jump yet to the realization that Christ was alive.

While this frustrates Jesus, he doesn’t write them off as total non-believers. He instead begins to walk them through all of Scripture, pointing out the key moments in Christ’s birth, life, and death, how the prophets foretold these events, and especially pointing out that all of these events have been according to God’s plan for the world.

Amazed by his teaching, Cleopas and his friend arrive in Emmaus and urge him strongly to stay with them. The stranger agrees to stay and then in Eucharistic form, he takes bread, blesses it, and breaks it, and gives it to them. And in that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized who he was. And in *that* moment, Jesus vanishes, leaving the other two in amazement and wonder.

Theologian Molly Marshall writes that, “witness is sustained by baptism and eucharist.”[[1]](#footnote-2) It is in the moment that Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to Cleopas and his friend, that their eyes are open, that they become *witnesses* to the resurrection. And their next action as witnesses is to return to Jerusalem and share their witness to the other disciples.

Because they have seen the risen Lord, they are able to share that witness with others. Jesus opens the Scriptures for them. He shares communion with them. He introduces ways that the Church can be the Church even without his physical presence.

I don’t know about you, but there have been many times in the past couple of weeks that I have wondered how we can continue to be the Church during this time.

How will our youngest friends know God’s love if we can’t meet for Sunday school? How can the people of our community see the hands and feet of Christ if Renewing Homes can’t go and replace windows and do threshold repair for those in need? How can we proclaim the risen Christ if we can’t physically have communion together?

This text from Luke assures me that Christ is there wherever one or two or more are gathered — virtually or physically.

Our inability to meet physically does not limit the power of God to meet us each personally, wherever we are.

Last week, I asked the parents of Covenant’s youngest to ask their children some questions. Sometimes when things seem so complicated, so beyond our understanding, it is helpful to hear the voices of our youngest, helping us to give words to how we are feeling.

I asked, “How do you know that God is with you?”

Here are their answers:

When I sing Hallelujah.

Because God is always with everyone whether they realize or not.

Because I feel like it. Because I feel joy in my body.

Because when we pray, I know God is with me. I know God is with me because God made me! God made me; God loves me!

I know God is with me when I have really happy days where I just feel like everything is going great and I learn things. Also, when I am having a bad day and need cheering up, I know God is with me then, too. When I feel like I need somebody, I can feel that somebody is there.

I know God is with me because he is always with us. Even when I’m sad. He’s always with me because he’s in my heart.

I asked them what they missed most about being at church.

Jonathan said, “I miss EVERYONE!”

Gus said, “I miss the children’s message and all the kids running up. And my Sunday school teachers.”

Gray said, “Learning and everybody…Crafts in Sunday school.”

Carter said, “I miss spending time with other people. And the spiffy outfits.”

Mason said, “I miss seeing friends and talking about God.” Then he added, “Well, we still talk about God, so just seeing friends.”

Aubrey said, “The church building, Sunday school, the nursery” and my personal favorite, “the sermon.”

Rebecca said, “I miss my friends. I miss them all.”

And Faith said what she missed most was communion.

In fact, several of our kids said that they missed communion.

That one kind of shocked me. Maybe I underestimated the faith of our youngest friends, but I loved that so many of them longed for this important aspect of our faith — communion with one another.

I will admit that one of the things I have missed the most about corporate worship is communion. I miss handing the bread to each person at the 8:30 service and telling them by name, “Mary Beth, Dick, Don, Guy, Bobbye, Janet, Earl, Marge…This is Christ’s body which is given to you.” I miss us all taking and eating or drinking as one body in the 10:30 service. I miss you all.

But this Gospel text and the answers from the kids of our church reminds me that God is with us always, not just when we are gathered as one in worship, but in our daily lives, in the sometimes seeming monotony of quarantine life.

When Cleopas and his companion break bread with the stranger, their eyes are opened and they see Christ before them and beside them. At first, they were just inviting a stranger who shared a similar interest to have supper with them. But in that holy moment of a simple act, their eyes were opened to the divine presence.

There are so many simple acts in our days these days. Zoom meetings, family phone calls, virtual classrooms, that we might often forget to look for the divine among the ordinary.

But thankfully, we have the children of our church to remind us of the divine in our every day lives.

Another question I asked the kids was - “How do you know that God loves you?”

Here are their answers:

Because people at church told me.

Because God created people and animals to show us that [God] cares about what you like and [God] cares about you.

Because [God] gave me a family like I have and [God] gave me life and all my friends and that I am alive and happy.

Because [God] loves us. God loves us because [God] always loves us.

How do you know that God loves you?

Because the Bible tells [me] so.

Friends, while we may mourn the fact that we cannot worship together, and believe me, I do mourn that, may we open our eyes to the ways in which Christ joins us in the every day things.

I know that you’re already sharing Christ’s love in numerous ways. John and I have heard about phone calls to friends in retirement communities and in confinement, about grocery shopping for our church friends who are immunocompromised. We’ve seen it with Zoom Session meetings, where our elders share concerns for how we are meeting the needs of our congregants and our community.

We’ve seen it this week online with Jonathan and his mom, Sally, singing “This is the Day” and Lee Clark reading “The Book With No Pictures” on Covenant’s Facebook page, and I personally reveled in getting to sing “Will The Circle Be Unbroken” on the Riddell family’s front lawn (while maintaining a 6-foot perimeter and following the fewer than 10 people rule) last Sunday evening.

While we may be limited in our physical space, this text reminds us that God has given us companions for the journey — be it virtual, spiritual, or physical (at a safe distance!). God is with us in the ordinary act of breaking bread, singing songs, and recognizing the life-giving Christ in our midst.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-2)