

Third Sunday of Easter, A
Acts 2: 14a, 36-41
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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These days we are dealing with rumors of resurrection. As citizens we're trying to process rumors of society preparing to re-open, wondering what this could mean for us. Will there be a resurrection from quarantine any time soon? As people of faith we are still processing the rumors of resurrection surrounding Easter, ancient reports that Christ has broken the bonds of death and set all creation free, and we are wondering what this means for us. How do we experience resurrection in a time of pandemic and lockdown? The Sundays of Easter are a sacred time to delve deep into this amazing promise, to savor and pray and ponder and spiritually receive the truth that Christ is risen, risen indeed.

The strange thing about living through a genuine turning-point in history, is that there's no way to understand its significance when you are living it in real time. In years to come, people will offer thousands of interpretations, and they'll have the benefit of hindsight, but right now what we have is a jumble of immediate experiences and thoughts and emotions. Boredom, anxiety, loneliness, sadness. Confusion, uncertainty, pain, grief, worry. Anger, distrust, frustration. But also hope, humor, resilience, encouragement. Small victories, community, beauty, and compassion.

So many things are unresolved and unsettled right now. We are beginning to catch on that the world we knew will be greatly altered on the other side, but what that will look like, we don't know, and we are rightfully suspicious of easy answers and false promises. We are making peace with what it is to live between times.

Into this jumble comes today's beautiful gift of scripture – two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This is one of the most luminous passages in the whole Bible, and it is also wonderfully down to earth in showing how Jesus, risen, alive, comes to us. It brings resurrection in a way we can receive and cherish.

The two disciples walking on the road were facing a crisis, a true turning-point in history. Their world had shifted through tragedy, and the future was now uncertain. We don't know exactly who they were – one was named Cleopas, and it is possible the companion was his wife. Luke's gospel often makes space for the witness of women, so it could well be. We don't know why they were headed to Emmaus, headed away from Jerusalem where other disciples were still hunkering down there together after Jesus' crucifixion. Maybe these two had obligations to tend to back home, or maybe they'd had enough of disappointment and just gave up. Decided it was over, no point in sticking around.

The Bible says they were “slow-hearted” or “slow of heart” on that road. Numb, confused, their brains weren’t working too well. We know what that’s like, don’t we? We’ve noticed how everything just seems to take longer these days, we’re “slow of heart” ourselves.

As a way of coping, the disciples were walking it out, talking it out. You know that kind of conversation. It’s not like talking face to face. Walking shoulder to shoulder allows people the space to voice feelings and wonder about things and leave questions hanging when there’s no answer to be found.

I think of the evening walks Aaron and I often take at the end of a long day of home isolation. We’ve been busy all day with church tasks and parenting hits-and-misses, household chores, long distance phone calls. After dinner when dusk is falling, we take the dog out in the neighborhood and just walk and talk. We bat around all sorts of topics -- family, the economy, the virus, politics, the world’s future, Lord have mercy! From questions that are way too big to answer, to small everyday matters we could actually make a difference by addressing. It helps to walk and talk.

Just as on that Emmaus road, it did the travelers good to puzzle through their lost hopes, their broken dreams, and mull over those rumors of resurrection. Reports of what happened just earlier that same Sunday, an empty tomb, angels speaking a promise. Was that just false hope, or could it be something more... ?

Then Jesus came and joined their musing. He came as a sympathetic stranger, someone outside their circle, a safe person with fresh ears to pour their hearts out to. I’ve heard this kind of conversation is happening quite often today, too. People are so isolated and lonely at home that they are hungry for listening ears. Customer service representatives are finding that phone calls are taking longer than they used to, almost verging on counseling sessions, because customers are just so glad to speak with a living soul. The gift of compassion they share is golden.

It means something that Jesus came as a stranger, because we each have choices to make about the strangers we meet on the road. When we come out of this pandemic, our attitude toward strangers could go either way. We could become habitually suspicious, keeping our distance, blaming all society’s troubles on outsiders – people are already taking that low road. On the other hand, we could emerge from this crisis remembering how much we need each other. We could end up reinvesting in community and solidarity, welcoming all. It’s clear which way scripture directs us, because if those disciples hadn’t welcomed the stranger on their road, they would not have met the living God.

Jesus brought God's loving presence near. He listened patiently, for miles and miles. He made space for their honesty, their pain, their fears, their uncertainty, just the way God does for all of us. There was no judgment, only kindness and acceptance, meeting them exactly where they were. Honoring their questions and struggle.

When Jesus did respond, it was to help them remember the story of their faith through scripture. Reaching back before the present trouble to remember who God always has been and always will be. How generation by generation, God gathers people and makes them God's own. How God provides for them, and God never deserts them in time of trouble. How they themselves were made part of God's family, just as you and I are part of God's family, claimed in baptism, accepted through unconditional love into a family of faith stretching across centuries.

And those travelers did remember. They remembered God was bigger than their present moment in time, bigger than the storm they were passing through, bigger than one lifetime or one generation. They saw how God is faithful throughout all time, from eternity to eternity. How God's love connects all of us to eternity and keeps us, now and forever.

And that very night, the God of eternity appeared to them in person. When Jesus broke the bread, they suddenly saw Jesus as he truly was, risen, alive, right there in all God's incandescent glory, glory shining down through the ages and even shining forward to a future none of us can see.

This vision upended what they thought they knew, what all of us think we know about how the world works. They saw everything fresh, with hope and love and courage and holy hindsight. Saw they had never been just two sad friends walking lonely down a road – God was there too. And that person who joined them was never a stranger, but a well-loved companion. Their simple dinner was not just a meal, but a sacrament. Their home was not just a shelter, but a place God was eager to dwell.

If we were to ask where Easter happened in this Bible story, we'd be tempted to say it happened in that mystical, luminous moment, that great "Aha!"

And yes, that was Easter, that was resurrection. But that was not the only place resurrection was real. Easter was also the risen Christ walking the road unrecognized beside God-loving people who were grieving and confused and slow of heart. This is Easter too, and this Easter is what I especially thank and praise God for today.

Because we are all on the road right now, we are in between places and beside ourselves. And the good news is, the risen Christ is always on the road with us. Always here, whether we see or don't see. Because it doesn't depend on us. This is God's work. Christ is risen to walk with us now and always.

In this pandemic Easter season, the wonderful good news is that resurrection will not always look like we expect. We expect Jesus a certain way, not mixed up with death or loss or economic decline or unemployment or a modern-day plague with all its levels of trouble. But the risen Jesus comes in places we don't expect and can't predict.

Jesus comes in strangers. In loving friends. In a fresh sunrise, an act of simple kindness, a beautiful song or dance or work of art that touches our soul. Jesus comes in moments like I experienced last week when we shared Holy Communion together after going without for so long, when somehow God transformed a bite of store-bought bread and a sip of fruit juice into a holy encounter that gave me what I needed to continue on down the road. Somehow, God keeps raising us up, more often than we know, minute by minute some days, working hope, renewing courage, keeping faith against the odds. Providing for us, encouraging, inspiring, working resurrection.

So many times I wish I could get a bird's eye view of what is happening to all of us. Or maybe a drone's eye view, the big picture. I feel like if I could just get a better perspective, I'd know how to be a better parent, a steadier spouse, a wiser pastor, more informed citizen, I could make it through these days more graciously. I want strategies, I want timelines, I want a game plan. But that's not how this thing works. Foresight is rare. Holy hindsight is always clearer. People don't manage catastrophes graciously. Life is messy, we depend on forgiveness, we live by grace and God's unconditional love.

What we can do is put one foot in front of the other, walk the path as faithfully as possible. And that's not nothing. That's what discipleship is, walking the path of Jesus, in the company of our risen Lord. This path is where resurrection happens.

The risen Christ is in this meal we share today, connecting us with generations of God-loving humans who have endured untold tragedies and struggles, to whom God continually draws near to bring courage and love and resilience and hope and trust. Easter assures us that no form of death can even separate us from God's love. Not a scary virus, not family conflict, not illness or addiction, not financial trouble, not our own shortcomings or repeated mistakes. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this week to come, I encourage you to expect Jesus, risen from the dead, to be a part of your life. Expect Jesus to join you, when and where you need a Savior. Be open to Christ's presence in your days and at this table, just as Christ has promised. With forgiveness, acceptance and healing, the risen Lord renews our lives again and again in God's eternal love. Thanks be to God. Amen.