

STAY WITH US, LORD



April 19, 2020

[Luke 24:13-27](#)

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It was still the first day of the week, and two disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about all the things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ 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?” ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and

all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Thanks be to God for His Holy Word, which is given unto us.

I saw a cartoon the other day that made me laugh. It showed a man and his dog, both kneeling on a couch looking over the back of the couch, through the front window toward the street. The man turns his head and says to the dog, “Now I finally understand why you get so excited whenever someone walks by the house.”

The psalmist puts the same idea, a little more poetically: “Like a deer longs for flowing streams, my soul longs for you, O God...” It is the first line of Psalm 42. Together with Psalm 43, these two poems express the depths of human longing for God and for each other. The writer of the Gospel of Luke uses these psalms as the back story as two lesser known disciples walk together toward the village of Emmaus, just down the road from Jerusalem on Easter Sunday. Luke describes them as walking, talking, and looking sad.

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” Why does this world feel so unfamiliar? Why can’t I sleep at night? Why do I feel so uncertain about my work, my family, my life? Where shall I search for inner peace? If there is a God, then why have you forgotten me? We know why the disciples were feeling this way, why their souls were disquieted. They had abandoned their teacher and friend, Jesus of Nazareth... had watched his crucifixion from afar, feeling afraid and helpless. They knew he had been buried, and they had heard rumors that were going around, about an empty tomb and that Jesus was alive. But this news seemed too improbable. It did not calm and quiet them; it made them even more anxious and afraid. They dared not believe such a thing.

So, they went for a walk. We too, are doing more walking these days. Since we can’t go anywhere or do anything, we put on our hiking shoes and go for a walk. I’ve seen people out walking in my neighborhood during the last month that I have never seen before. Or at least, something keeps my eyes from recognizing them.

It was unusual for people to walk alone in the first century. It was unsafe, to be on your own, whether within the city or outside; so, when they come upon a man walking alone, the disciples do the polite thing—they invite the stranger to join them. This stranger asks to get in on the conversation and the disciples are surprised to learn that this man knows nothing of what has been happening in Jerusalem all weekend. In their eyes, at least, the crucifixion of Jesus was not just a life-changing event for them, but for the entire city and nation. “We thought Jesus would be the one who would redeem Israel.” It is a dangerous thing to talk so openly about these nationalistic and religious hopes, and yet, they must feel as if they have nothing left to lose. They bare their souls to this stranger.

This stranger may not be up on current events, but he knows Scripture. He doesn't quote Torah to them—doesn't interpret Levitical laws—but he knows his prophets. So beginning with Moses—and Israel considers Moses the first and foremost of God's prophets—and through all the other prophets, this stranger interprets Scriptures that teach about the Messiah. When they reach their destination, the sun is low in the sky, and they urge this stranger who has become their friend to stay with them. In fact, the language they use is insistent, compelling—they all but twist his arm: "Stay with us, Lord."

We know why our souls are disquiet within us, as well. We know why we've lost track of the days, why we are always on edge, why we have sleepless nights, and worry about our future and our children's future. It is fear—pure, blind fear of this pandemic and the death that it carries. Such fear can be seen and heard in the voices of our leaders, our neighbors, our loved ones. Such fear was on display Wednesday as people got into their cars and drove to the State Capital in order to stage some nebulous protest. It was a venting of anger and frustration without meaning or purpose; bare action with no end in sight. Writing after the Second World War, Albert Camus used a plague in Algiers as an opportunity to explore existential questions: Are human beings mostly foolish, or mostly noble? Are we made in the image of God, or are we a random collection of molecules who bounce into each other, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill?

The Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, has reflected upon conditions in his nation during this pandemic. He writes: "Fear is a poor advisor, but it does cause many things to appear that we have long pretended not to see. The wave of panic in Italy and the rest of the world shows that our society no longer believes in anything except bare life... this kind of fear is not something that unites people—it blinds and separates them."

In the trial of Jesus, Pilate tells him that he—Pilate—holds the power of life and death. Jesus responds by saying that any power Pilate has, has been given to him from above. It is an important reminder in this moment, we are called to affirm our faith that God is the Lord of this world. We must bow to our mortality, true, but we can wrest from it what we can of our humanity, which is made for more than death. When we comfort the suffering and mourn the dead, we are not curing or rescuing. We are asserting by our words and actions that suffering and death do not have the final word; God does.

Perhaps you watched a live stream event on You Tube last Sunday—Easter Sunday. World famous tenor, Andrea Bocelli, sang sacred music from the cathedral in Milan, Italy—the Duomo. Italy is a nation and a people overwhelmed by this pandemic, and the city of Milan is mentioned in the same breath with Wuhan and New York City. Bocelli wanted to use his gift as a singer to instill hope for his homeland and for the people of the world. The camera panned around in this great empty cathedral, full of art and architecture meant to reflect the glory of God, yet the place was empty, and that emptiness was palpable. Just one singer and one man playing the organ—ten feet from each other—and they filled the world with song. Then Bocelli walked through the cathedral and went outside. The streets were deserted. Yet his voice was like the voice of John the Baptist—a voice crying in the

wilderness—as he sang Amazing Grace, unaccompanied. “T’was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” All the loneliness and despair on display in the empty church and the empty streets, was bound up and lifted by one voice to the very throne of God.

On a smaller scale, my grandchildren called me up via Facetime. Their father who is always looking for home improvement projects, had a new play structure delivered to their home and he assembled it for Easter. The boys were so excited. They wanted to show me all it’s intricacies—the slides and swings, the telescope on the tower. But it was not enough just for me to see. So, Evan, 5 years old, grabbed the phone, ran up to the top and went down the tubular slide pointing the camera at his toes so I could “experience” sliding down with him. I’ll admit, it did make me a little dizzy. “I hope we can play soon, Papa.” Me too, Evan.

The unknown Jesus stays with the disciples in Emmaus. They sit down together, the three of them, and Jesus takes bread, give thanks, breaks the bread, and offers it to these disciples. It was then, Luke tells us, that they finally recognized Jesus. And in the manner that these mysterious resurrection stories are told, as soon as the disciples recognize Jesus, he is gone. They are left sputtering and stammering, looking at one another and wondering what they exactly they have just witnessed. “Did not our hearts warm inside us as we listened to him teach on the road. We should have known then that it was Jesus himself.” But words are not enough. So the disciples jump up from the table and run—in the dark—they run back to Jerusalem in order to tell Peter what they have just experienced.

Once again, they are a step behind. Jesus has already visited Peter and the others. And they sit down together, astounded at what they have seen and heard—astounded, and changed forever.

You see, the church survives by sacraments – by outward and tangible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. That is the very definition of a sacrament. It is substance. That includes not only water, bread and wine, but also men, women and children who are willing to live a certain way, to seek to follow the living God, even as that same God searches for us. Because we are creatures of flesh, we learn best by flesh. God knows that if nothing else gets our attention, then what happens to our bodies will do the trick. Cool water on a hot day, the weight of a sleeping child against the chest, food shared with strangers, our hearts pounding in the middle of the night – these are the things that make theologians out of all of us.

These are also the things that make us real to one another. Thank goodness we can see each other and speak to one another using today’s technology. But we ought to be wearing black armbands to express our grief, as Americans wore during the Great Influenza of 1918. For we are grieving not just the dead—we are grieving our work, our play, our friendships, our ability to show affection, our family closeness, and our religious practices. For now, we must pay even more attention to one another, name what has been lost, and seek to

recognize the Christ who would be seen and heard, right here and now, in the midst of our struggle to be faithful. Amen.