

Encountering Jesus on the Road

By: Meagan McLaughlin

April 26, 2020. Pastor Meagan preaches on the story of Cleopas and the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus. Cleopas and the unnamed disciple tell Jesus everything. What would you tell Jesus, if you were walking with him, about the events of these last few weeks?

Reading: [Luke 24:13-35](#)

*** Transcript ***

When change happens quickly, or when something somewhat traumatic occurs, it can take time to grasp even the simplest details of what has happened. One such event that stands out for me took place many years ago. I was driving from La Crescent in southern Minnesota up to the Twin Cities with a college friend, and another driver pulled in front of me and then hit the brakes. I immediately tried to slow down, but I knew that it was no use. We hit the other car from behind, and we came to an abrupt stop. My first reaction was to apologize profusely to my friend for the colorful language that had come spewing out of my mouth as I watched the accident unfold. And as we got out of the car and began to assess the damage, the reality of what had happened slowly began to seep in. I looked at the front of the car, now pushed into itself accordion-like. “This doesn’t look good.” I noted the broken headlights, the glass and the plastic scattered on the ground. “No, not good at all.” Then I saw fluids seeping out from under the car, and the peculiar angle of the front tires. “I’m not sure I can drive this home.” The liquid began to pool, the colors blending together on the ground. “No, I don’t think I can drive my car home.” Then, it dawned on me that we were two hours from home. And no cell phone. And no extra car in my pocket.

It sounds pretty quick laying it out like that, but the embarrassing truth is, to my recollection, it took nearly half an hour to figure all that out. I couldn’t bear the full picture of what had happened all at once. We can probably all think of times when something happened that took a long time to “sink in.” Some of them may be painful or traumatic things, like accidents. Or diagnoses. Or losing a job. Or the death of a loved one. Painful things happen, and it can take a while to process and settle into new realities that are not what we anticipated or hoped for. Some of them may be joyful things. Like the birth of a healthy child. Falling in love, or getting married. Even times of joy can be overwhelming. And we can find ourselves struggling to grasp and name what has happened, and what it means.

And so, we can relate to the disciples, as they struggled to sort out for themselves the reality of Jesus’ death, the empty tomb, the reports that Jesus had been seen alive, impossible though that seemed. And so as Cleopas and the unnamed disciple walked along the road to Emmaus together — breathing in fresh air and absorbing the sunshine, perhaps watching the birds flying overhead, after days of being closed up in the Upper Room — they talked it all over again, trying to make sense of it. And then a stranger joins them on the road, and overwhelmed and exhausted and confused as they are, they don’t even realize it’s Jesus! And Jesus, as they are walking along, doesn’t seem to know anything about what his disciples are discussing. And he asks them: what things? What things have happened? Tell me the story.

And so Cleopas and the unnamed disciple, walking along the road with their new friend, are invited to share all of the challenges, the fears, the heartbreaks, and the confusion that they’re going through, while Jesus listens to them. Jesus didn’t need them to tell him what had happened. Remember, he was there! But he wanted to know *their* story, how they were experiencing things, how they were feeling

about it. Jesus knew how important it was, as they worked through it all, to tell that story one more time.

And this invitation is not just for them. Cleopas is not one of the more “famous” disciples, not one of the leaders. And the unnamed disciple could be anyone. We are all included in this invitation. In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all of the adjusting, and adapting, and loss and grief, and closing ourselves away physically for a time, and uncertainty, and discovering new skills and new ways of doing things, we all need to do literally or figuratively what Cleopas and his companion did: take time to ground ourselves in God’s creation, breathe in fresh air, move our bodies, and share what we are experiencing with a friend. Jesus invites not only the disciples, but us, to walk with him, to tell our story, to share our thoughts and experiences with all that has taken place in these recent weeks.

Cleopas and the unnamed disciple tell Jesus everything. How Jesus had been arrested, and put on trial, and crucified. What would you tell Jesus, if you were walking with him, about the events of these last few weeks?

They told their new friend how they had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. What are things that you hoped for that now seem uncertain, or even impossible? What hopes have been lost, or have changed?

Cleopas and the unnamed disciple told Jesus that some of the other disciples had seen signs of hope in the midst of the gruesome events they had experienced. Indications that perhaps Jesus’ death was not as final as it seemed. What signs of hope do you see in these days? Where have you experienced joy, in the midst of the challenges of this time? Where have you seen evidence of new life?

And after they had talked, the disciples invited Jesus to stay with them and eat. The table for Jesus is a place of bounty, of unity with all of those with whom Jesus ate, of renewal of community for those who had been excluded. Jesus’ table shows up in so many places in our gospel stories: the wedding at Cana where Jesus provides wine, the religious leader’s home, the tax collector’s home, the field where 5,000 people are gathered, the feast celebrating the return of the Prodigal Son, the Passover supper that Jesus and disciples shared, the shore where the disciples are despondently cooking fish after Jesus died, just to name a few.

So it is no surprise really when they sit down to eat, and broke the bread together as they had so many times before, that this is the moment when Cleopas and the unnamed disciple realize that the “stranger” with whom they had been walking was Jesus. He had been with them all along! And it dawned on them: that is why their hearts had been burning as they walked along the road with Jesus! As they had been talking, they had been looking, hoping, yearning for answers to all of the questions they were holding. Why Jesus had to die. Why he hadn’t saved himself. Why God hadn’t saved him. Why Jesus had left them. We often feel those questions, that weight, in our bodies — in our shoulders, our head, our gut, our chest — and the disciples are no different. And when Jesus was listening to them, reassuring them of God’s love and presence, they felt the hope and promise in their bodies too, in the burning of their hearts.

The thing is, the disciples didn’t actually understand any better why things were happening the way they were. That ultimate question of why bad things happen has been the subject of books and lectures and study for years, and no one has really come up with a good answer. The hard truth is, as much as we wish we could understand why things like the pandemic happen, why loved ones die, why we experience pain, we don’t know. But the disciples did know that God was with them. They did

understand, as they saw that Jesus had been with them all along, that God's love and mercy was a promise that God would never break.

We see again this week, as we walk along with the disciples, that resurrection is not an act completed, but is about persistence in the midst of the very real challenges of this human life. Resurrection springs up like a burning in our hearts, an eruption of hope and maybe even joy in the recognition of Jesus' presence. Where have you seen the Lord?

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Luke 24:13-35, coronavirus