We’re All in Different Places This Eastertide
Sermon for April 26, 2020
For Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
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Scripture Reading:

The Walk to Emmaus
13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. 18Then 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?’ 19He 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, 20and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21But 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. 22Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23and 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. 24Some 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.’ 25Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ 27Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.
28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29But 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. 30When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32They 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?’ 33That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ 35Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon

Have you ever taken a moment to count up the number of Easter stories in the Bible? I mean, the stories of the day of Easter, and the stories of encounter with the risen Christ before the story of his ascension?

You know, each of these folks who experienced the first Easter and the days after were in different places, physically and metaphorically.

There are several accounts of women going to the tomb, either to study the tomb - Matthew’s version or to anoint Jesus’ body. They left blessed and they told their friends, preaching the first Easter sermons. The women who saw him felt their faith strengthened and renewed.

The eleven - first, Peter started the day incredulous, Luke says, but he went to the tomb and left amazed. The rest of the apostles were scared and isolated and hiding behind locked doors. Jesus came to them and offered peace - except for Thomas, who perhaps drew the short straw and had to stand in line at the store to buy toilet paper, and wound up even more confused when he came back to the upper room.

Peter eventually had to go back to work - perhaps he was an essential worker providing fish to hungry folks or perhaps his unemployment application had not yet gone through, but he encountered the risen Jesus in full baskets and breakfast on the beach and and a call to feed Jesus’ sheep.

Mark and Luke both share this morning’s story of the Emmaus road, late on Easter day, two people walking together, away from Jerusalem, who encountered Jesus. Their hearts were warmed. Jessica and Cleopas encountered a stranger, realized he was hungry and tired, invited him to share their meal - and realized they were offering hospitality to Jesus, the one who had taught them radical hospitality.

And Jesus appeared to more folks in different places for a few more weeks, according to Gospels.

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You know, each one of us, in this Eastertide, we are in different places, not just physically but metaphorically.

To my knowledge, those in the congregation who’ve had CoVid19 have recovered well. But members of the congregation have lost friends and siblings. The grief of this moment is touching us in different ways.

I invited the congregation to anonymously share how you’re doing, and we heard from 28 respondents which is probably about 25 different households. Now, those who filled in the survey, don’t panic, I’m not about to share anybody’s business. But - the vast majority of those who answered said they are okay in terms of food, shelter and income. That’s a blessing, and that’s also a reflection on our demographic. A fair number of folks are busier than ever - working from home, on platforms we’ve never used before, dealing with our own anxiety and that of the institution that we work for, and many also homeschooling. On the other hand, a fair number of folks are bored. They’ve cleaned out the last junk drawer. A bunch of us are, or have been anxious in this time, and no wonder. But some are fine taking it day by day. Finally, most of us are focused on the needs of this moment - but a lot of us are starting to wonder what things will look like after this acute crisis passes - how will the world have changed? How will we attend to the needs of those around us?

Spiritually, some of us are like the women who first encountered the risen Christ - we’ve got purpose for our days, and we’re strongly grounded in our faith. And some of us are like the eleven - anxious, feeling shaky, or we’ve got too many people staying in our house. All of us are taking it day by day.

Now, as I said, it indicates something about this congregation that we’re not yet experiencing widespread income loss - there’s some - or food insecurity. That puts us in a strange bubble, given that 650,000 people in Massachusetts have lost jobs in this crisis. Every food pantry in the state, including Lexington’s, is seeing more people in need. (Yes, you can donate food and money right now.) I think there’s an invitation for us each to reflect carefully on our resources and what God is inviting us to do with them in this moment.

What I’m getting to here is - folks in our congregation are in different places - geographically, economically, emotionally and spiritually from one another - and our congregation as a whole is in a different place economically from many of our neighbors. The question, then, is what do we do with that insight?

I’m thinking of Jessica and Cleopas.
They were walking down the Emmaus Road.
Away from the city, away from the outbreak of fear and grief,
Traveling with sadness,
Wrestling with the devastation to their community.
And alongside them came someone they didn’t recognize.

Were their eyes blurred with tears?

Were they so focused on getting home that they didn’t even look up?

I’ve always figured that resurrection is such a radical change that no one would have thought this was the same One they’d known, until he called them by name, offered them Peace, took, blessed, broke and gave them bread.

Here’s the thing about Jessica and Cleopas:
They recognized the risen Christ when they invited a stranger to dinner.

There’s two ways folks in the Bible met the risen Christ:

The first way, they’re scared and worried, gathered in an isolated spot, when he came through a locked door to offer peace.

Or the second way, they offered a kindness for someone - anointing a body, or inviting a stranger to dinner.

We’re all in different places this Eastertide. Some of us are scared and isolated - and Jesus is showing up to say peace.

Some of us are doing okay - able to share. The Emmaus Road is the Easter story for those who have resources to share.

When you take care of someone who needs it;
When you offer hospitality to the stranger;
You are loving your neighbor, loving God, and
You’re giving yourself the chance to meet the risen Christ.

I must say one of the hardest things about this moment is that we can’t invite friends or strangers, hungry or otherwise, over for dinner.

But, if we have bread to share, we can still give it.
In fact, Pilgrims are, right now, giving bread, masks, money, kindness, love, support to friends and strangers who are in need.

And I pray that in doing so, your hearts are warmed, recognizing the risen Christ in your midst.

Amen.

A Poem by Mary Oliver

Instructions for living a life.
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.