

Opened Eyes, Burning Hearts

**Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
The Seventh Sunday of Our Global Pandemic Crisis
April 26, 2020**

**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Foxborough, Massachusetts
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Reading: Luke 24:13-35

“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...” (Luke 24:31)

I.

The Walk to Emmaus is one of the most interesting post-resurrection stories in the Gospels. It has so many elements that we can identify with, especially now, as we try to find our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the disciples on the first Good Friday and Easter, we also are experiencing a variety of responses to our present-day circumstances.

The story begins with two disciples walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about seven miles. Now that’s about 14,000 to 17,000 steps if you’re counting. If you are like my wife and me, you’ve been doing a lot of walking these days, exploring different streets in your neighborhood or trails in the woods.

As Cleopas¹ and another disciple walked to Emmaus, they talked about recent events. They still walked in the shadows of grief, defeat, and uncertainty, after their beloved leader, Jesus of Nazareth, was executed on a Roman cross just two days earlier. We would still be in a state of shock, like they were, only 48 hours after a loved one died a tragic death.

My wife and I also talk about the news when we walk: appalled by the actions of some and the inaction of others, the denial of some and defiance of others, while worrying about our loved ones, near and far, especially those at high risk. Our conversations range from the public health to the economy, to the courage and compassion of so many; and, the flowers across the street!

At times like this, our conversations range from profound to mundane, from existential threats to everyday concerns: like toilet paper, flour, and hand sanitizer. Just as the disciples on the Emmaus road witnessed everyday life continuing while they contemplated the horrors of their experience, we experience that same ebb and flow, from spring yardwork to pandemic threat.

As the Emmaus-bound disciples talked, a stranger approached. Just like we might encounter a stranger with particular expertise, they encountered an unexpected expert. (Imagine running into Dr. Anthony Fauci on Easter afternoon walk.² This is the equivalent!) The Emmaus road stranger knew a lot about the events of the first Good Friday and Easter, and what they meant. He also chastised the two disciples for being so ill-informed:

“Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”³

We have known about pandemics for centuries. We now know how to fight and contain them. Public health prophets and scientists have cried out for reforms, plans, and precautions for years. We have ignored their warnings or were ignorant of them altogether. How foolish we were and slow of heart to believe the expertise of God’s prophets in our own time!

II.

The conversation must have gone on for some time, because the stranger remained with them until they came to Emmaus. Though the stranger walked ahead as if he was on his way to another destination, the two disciples invited him to eat dinner and stay with them. Why go hungry and risk the dangers of the dark when you have been offered food and shelter?

So, the stranger with remarkable expertise about current events and their meaning accepted their offer and went in to stay with them. “When he was at 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.”⁴ They then 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 [to tell the other disciples all that had happened]. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened to them on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.⁵

Don’t ask me to explain the stranger’s vanishing act. That’s for another day, another sermon, another Bible study. Not today. Let’s focus instead on the disciples’ response: their eyes were opened and their hearts ignited as he broke bread and opened their minds to the scriptures. *God was still speaking*⁶, even after the death of Jesus!

It's hard to explain what happened. All we know through Luke’s reporting is that something happened, and that “*Something*” changed everything. The crucified, dead, and buried Jesus was somehow experienced as the Risen Christ. In that moment, hope was reborn as everything came together and began to make sense to them.

That evening, they risked their personal safety to walk the same seven miles back to Jerusalem to share the Good News. God only knows how long it took them to go all the way back after dark. Two hours if they walked like we do. Maybe faster given the Good News they needed to share! That’s a lot of walking: maybe 30,000 steps!

What strikes me about these post-Easter stories is how quickly their lives were turned upside down in a devastating and deadly way. A three-year movement filled with hope and promise died tragically on a Friday afternoon, 48 hours earlier. Moving from hiding in fear to going public with courage took time, just as it will for us. There must be a good reason why the Risen Christ was experienced again, and again, an again. Perhaps hope takes time to restore!

How ironic that Easter spans an entire season, 50 days from Easter sunrise to Pentecost morning, when enlightened and empowered disciples finally went public with their apostolic proclamation that Christ was risen!⁷ They hid in their homes for over 50 days from the crucifixion until their public proclamation of the Good News on Pentecost.

It's been 49 days since we last worshipped together in our sanctuary. On Sunday, March 8th there were 28 COVID-19 cases in Massachusetts.⁸ Today there are about 56,000 cases ⁹ – an increase of about 200,000%! Our Easter season is much like the first one. We now talk a lot about what has happened and need enlightenment about what it means for the future.

III.

With this in mind in this unusual Easter season, let's ask these questions:

- What will it take for us to open our eyes and hearts to the Risen Christ?
- Whose guidance do we need to understand what happened and what it means?
- Which experts and leaders, saints and sages, do we need listen to and learn from?
- Who should we listen to for everyone's safety and security, not just our own?
- Do we need evidence-based, collective wisdom, or opinionated, coercive rage?
- Do we need light to show us the way, or scorched-earth heat to clear out the opposition?
- Do we need to seek solutions and strategies, or instead find fault and blame?

Some of us in this Easter season have our mouths wide open and our minds shut tight. We see only what we choose to watch and accept as truth only what we want to hear. "The selective use of the facts that prop up my position, and the complete rejection of [someone else's facts helps to create] the new post-truth reality"¹⁰ that we now live in.

I live on Earth One, in my reality, and you live on Earth Two, in your reality, and 'never shall the twain meet.'¹¹ Meanwhile, we yell at each other¹², claiming: "You have your truth and I have my truth!" That will be the death of us if we think that way! "Everyone has the right to an opinion, but not to their own facts"¹³, especially unverified, discredited, or magical "facts."

U.S. Naval War College professor Tom Nichols wrote in 2017: "These are dangerous times. Never have so many people had access to knowledge and yet been so resistant to learning anything."¹⁴ How timely his words are for this moment in time! Isn't it time to open our minds and hearts to understand: (1) what happened; (2) how to respond; and (3) how to treat each other?

I will leave the first two questions – what happened and how to respond – to the most credible and trusted experts in public health, science, economics, and government. When it comes to how we treat each other, that's where the Risen Christ has something to say to us. That's where courageous and compassionate Christians, and all people of good will, have something to say.

As we journey forward on this long road of uncertainty, grieving the people and way of life we have lost, and wondering what life will be like going forward: Who will we invite to walk with us? Who will we listen to? Whose interpretation of events will we agree to? Whose movement will we support with our allegiance and resources?

I pray that your answer will be: The One who preached the Sermon on the Mount; the One who gave us the Beatitudes; the One who taught us how to pray; the One who taught to love our enemies, and to love God and neighbors as ourselves; the One who told us that when we help the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and destitute, the sick and imprisoned, we are helping Him.¹⁵

The Risen Christ is walking with us on our journey even today. Will you listen to him? Will you open your eyes and hearts to him? Will you take to heart his insights and interpretations? Will you invite him into your life and break bread with him, not just at the Communion Table but in the brokenness of life and in service to God's broken world?

This is so much more than a call to personal salvation, whatever that means for you or me. This is a call to people with eyes opened and hearts burning to build God's Beloved Community, God's common weal and wealth, here and now, and in the coming post-pandemic world. This our calling going forward. May God give us the strength for the journey ahead! Amen.

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END NOTES AND REFERENCES

(Note: Unless indicated, all Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.)

1. This is Cleopas' only New Testament appearance, although some believe he is the Clopas mentioned in John 19:25. See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Cleopas>.
2. Dr. Anthony Fauci has served as Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984 and currently serves on the White House Coronavirus Task Force.
3. Luke 24:25
4. Luke 24:30-31
5. Luke 24:32-35
6. In their time, and ours, "God is still speaking!" See: <https://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking>.
7. See Acts 2
8. Source: <https://www.mass.gov/news/15-new-presumptive-positive-cases-of-covid-19-identified-by-massachusetts-state-public-health>.
9. As of Friday, April 24, 2020, when this sermon was posted there were 50,969 cases. 56,000 is based on average day-to-day increase for the previous seven days.
10. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* ["The M.I.T. Essential Knowledge Series"]. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 2020; p. 33.
11. See: <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/never+the+twain+shall+meet>. Meaning: People, things, or groups are so fundamentally different from one another that they will never be able to coexist or think alike. This is where we are now in American society, and it will get worse if we all fail to address it. Pandemics test how committed we really are to each other and how willing we are to cooperate.
12. The appalling insolence of recent "liberty" protests is deeply disturbing to me, and I hope to you as well. Watching an angry protester yell "Go back to China!" to a healthcare worker, the very person who would (if needed) save her life, is beyond the pale. Anxiety is understandable. Rage is unacceptable! As a virtue, anger rejects rage and resignation in favor of constructive change.
13. A saying attributed to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.
14. See: Thomas L. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
15. Here I refer to Matthew chapters 5-7, and Matthew 25:31-46. These passages represent a distillation of Jesus' teachings, an exposition of Micah 6:8 unlike any other!