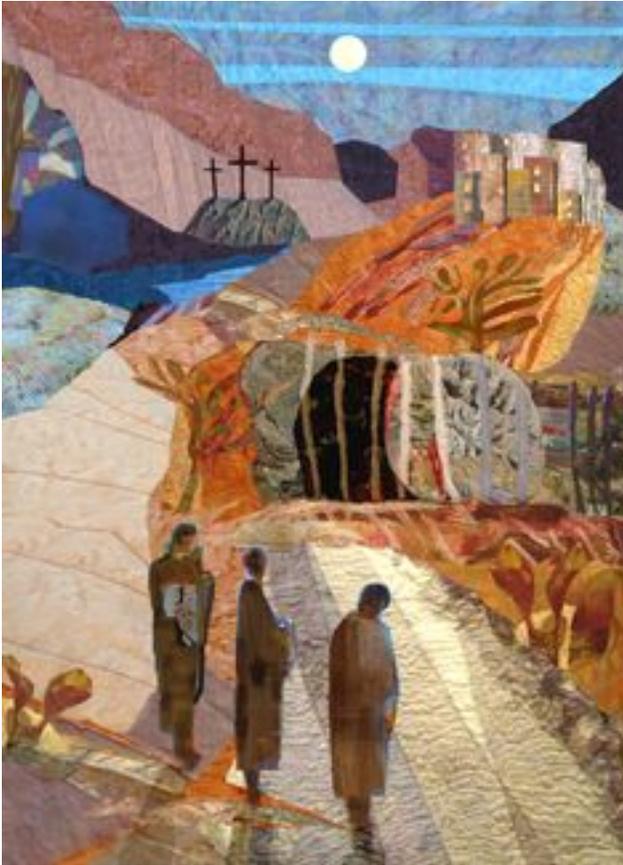


Easter 3, Year A (RCL)
April 26, 2020
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Stay With Us



Two travelers, deep in conversation, trudge slowly west-northwest toward their home in Emmaus. Behind them lies the holy city of Jerusalem, their beloved temple, the recent Passover celebration, the awful hill on which Jesus and the two criminals had been crucified (a sight they wished they could un-see but could not), the baffling now-empty tomb, their friends who had also been disciples of Jesus. Behind them also lie their hopes, now crushed into dust like so many rocks beneath their feet on the road. Both physically and emotionally exhausted by all that has happened over the past few days, and by this day that seems as though it must surely have been a week already, their shoulders droop, weighed down by the enormity of their grief.

"I had so hoped that he was the one God had sent to deliver us from the oppression of the Romans," one says.
"Yes," sighs the other. "I had hoped as well."
"I was so sure. I mean, he was so convincing! Just being near him – I don't know – there was something so confident – so compelling. I was just sure he was the one."
"But he wasn't. Now we're just as bad off now as we were before – maybe even worse."

Distracted, they hadn't noticed the stranger behind them on the road, who now approaches interrupting their conversation.

It is Jesus, of course, but they don't recognize him as he slows his pace and walks alongside them. They don't recognize him as he interprets scripture for them, nor when they reach out to him to offer the hospitality of their home for the night. "Stay with us," they beg the stranger, "because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."

In this story, Jesus is doing what Jesus does, what he has always done. He engages, he teaches, he opens the scriptures, he walks with people along roads of grief and longing, he is the guest, he is the host, he breaks bread in an ordinary home with ordinary people, he blesses the bread, and in so doing, blesses them. It is in that moment that their eyes are opened and they finally see clearly that it is Jesus who has been with them all along. And as soon as they recognize him, the one they had invited to stay with them is suddenly gone again.

Puzzle pieces begin to fall into place in their spinning minds. Weren't our hearts burning within us as he opened the scriptures to us? Of course it was Jesus! We have to go back to Jerusalem, tonight, to tell the others.

I love this story. I've always loved this story. But this Easter season of 2020 I hear it with new ears because of our new circumstances. Certainly 2020, this time of pervasive pandemic, is different from anything we have experienced in our lifetimes. For myself, this year was the first time in the 63 years of life that I was not physically present in church on Easter Sunday. Added to that, I can't recall a time over the past 33 years when I have missed receiving the Eucharist for more than three weeks in a row. I miss the Eucharist, as I know many of you do. I miss our beloved congregation. I miss being able to grieve together over the losses of Chuck and David. I know that this time of being apart is necessary and that it is one of the ways we can show our love for one another right now. But still, there is a grief we experience in our separation.

In the Emmaus story, Jesus is made known to them in the breaking of the bread. We long for Jesus to once again break bread with us, to invite us to his table where bread is broken and wine is poured and where we can share together in the Holy Eucharist. We look forward to the day when we can join together in worship once again and celebrate the risen Christ together.

Yet for now, we must content ourselves with eating alone or in the company of those with whom we share our home. We look for our spiritual nourishment at our own kitchen tables or in Zoom gatherings as we break open scripture there. We need not go hungry! We will simply find our spiritual nourishment in unfamiliar places and in unfamiliar ways. The fact that the risen Christ is not limited to the four walls of 912 20th Avenue in Coralville is not news to us, but has been made even more clear to us in these weeks of not being able to be there together. Christ lives in our hearts and in our homes and will continue to feed us where we are. For many of us, more time for reading, study, and prayer is one of the gifts of this time sequestered in our homes.

In a column this week from *Enfleshed*, the Rev. Anna Bladel shared her experience of joining “other spiritual leaders in listening to (Zen Buddhist) Roshi Joan Halifax speak about the grief of this present time as a rite of passage. Like all rites of passage, she said, there are three interwoven phases. Separation— from each other, from beloveds, from community, from the patterns and rhythms that have structured, for better and worse, our daily living. Then, a threshold time. Thresholds are thin spaces, holy and unsettled. Thrash and thresh share the same root. We thrash about as everything “stable,” “certain,” “secure” is stripped away and we face the radical uncertainty that is more true than the structures of certainty we often cling to. She noted how threshold spaces invite us to become allies with not knowing. And, finally, slowly, in its own time, integration and return. This comes only after we have discerned what wisdom and insight we will bring from the threshold. What is the grief teaching us? In moments of rupture and crisis, new ways of being can emerge.”ⁱ

The Emmaus disciples, the post-resurrection faith community, and we, here in the midst of our COVID-19 reality, all share in inhabiting that second stage of threshold time to which Roshi Halifax refers in which “we thrash about as everything stable, certain, secure is stripped away and we face the radical uncertainty that is more true than the structures of certainty we often cling to.” Can we see this challenging time as an invitation to “become allies with not knowing”?

And when the final phase of integration and return finally comes, what will our grief have taught us?

One thing I think we can know with a fair degree of certainty is that we will not emerge from this pandemic the same people or the same church that we were before. This global crisis of grief, having stripped us of much that we thought we knew to be true, and having revealed to us all that we value most, will help us see ourselves and one another differently. It will teach us new ways of being together, of sharing burdens, of coping with loss and of sharing grief. At this point, still living in the threshold stage, we have no idea of what the integration and return stage might look like. But just as the meaning of Christ's presence with the Emmaus disciples changed from physically sitting and breaking bread with them to being with them in a resurrected spiritual sense, we too will find a new reality of living with and for one another, of living with and for those who are most vulnerable, and of being church together. But for now, in this threshold stage, let us know that Christ walks alongside us, even when we do not recognize the presence we long for.

¹ From Enfleshed's bi-monthly column, "A week in shelter and shadow," by Rev. Anna Blaedel, published April 23, 2020.