

Sermon 4-18-21

Paul Purdue preaching

Two pilgrims headed home from the festival with hearts weighed down. They are disappointed with church and state. Listen to their heartache: “Do you not know the news about: Jesus of Nazareth, who was recognized by God and the people as a prophet, but our chief priests and leaders handed Jesus over to be crucified. But, we had hoped Jesus was the one to heal...” Hope in the past tense: “We had hoped” still haunts us. We had hoped we would not need to add “Daunte Wright” and “Adam Toledo” to our list of lamentations for brown and black lives lost to law enforcement. We had hoped to not mourn the loss of three year old Jamayla Marlowe shot in Nashville or a student in Knoxville or eight souls in Indianapolis. How long, oh Lord, before we stem America’s love affair with violence and guns 106 lives that take 106 lives each day. 39 murders, 64 suicides, 1 accident, and 1 by law enforcement. We had hoped our churches might remember Jesus' command “turn the other cheek” and Jesus' prophecy that “all who live by the sword will die by the sword: (therefore) put your weapons away.” (Matthew 5:39 & 26:52)

“We had hoped” haunted these two pilgrims as they left the Holy City. For seven miles the Risen Christ mysteriously walks with these downcast souls, but somehow , “they were prevented from recognizing Jesus!” Who expects Jesus to come as a chatty stranger? When they arrive at their homes the pilgrims offer Christ-The- Stranger a meal, lodging, and the honor of offering the diner blessing. Such beautiful hospitality was routine Jewish practice. It is only when Jesus “took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” That “their eyes were opened and they recognized Christ, but Christ disappeared from their sight.”

So often it is like that. Jesus appears maybe for a few fleeting moments and then just as quickly disappears. So often, Jesus is walking along with us unrecognized. We may not see Jesus until we step out of the lonesome valley. This week as I scrolled through 7962 old photos on my phone, I stumbled upon one of my youngest cradling my mother. For the last five years of her life my mom lived with us as alzheimers slowly stole her away. So many times our hope slipped into the past tense: “we had hoped”. Yet, looking through those 2016 photos, I could see Jesus in Connie snuggled up asleep next to mom. And there was Jesus, looking alot like my brother, napping, shoes off, in a chair keeping vigil by mom’s bedside. And I thanked Jesus for the fleeting twinkle in mom’s eye as I gazed at Lewis & Jillin sitting by Grannie. I remembered mom’s last cogent sentence: “Well, where have you been: Good Looking? “At college, Granny”- “I knew that,” she said, patting her knee and beckoning Lewis to abide near her. “Where two or three come together for holy work”; Jesus promises to abide with us. (Matthew 18:20) I see Jesus, more clearly now, looking back across those stressful days.

We may walk for seven miles or seven months, not realizing God walks with us. But then we pause to kneel- making space at the inner altar and we look up to see Jesus breaking the bread, washing feet, lingering in a friend’s long sympathetic pause, or laughing in the delight of a child at play. I have seen Jesus folding clothes at the food

bank and standing at my door with a casserole. I have seen Jesus hugging a Mom at Pride, as tears of gratitude ran down her face for our sharing the message of God' Love and Acceptance of her tran's teenager. I've felt the ripple of Christ's Temple Protest pulsating through a crowd marching for justice. **When do you pause and look around listening for the often unnoticed but Risen Christ?**

The two who had hoped, now, said to each other, "Weren't our hearts on fire when Christ spoke to us along the road and when Christ explained the scriptures for us?" John Wesley spoke of a holy moment when his "heart was strangely warmed." Spotting God always transcends any formula moving us to metaphor. In my basement workshop is a plaster cast Jesus, a kind of prayer station inscribed: "I will bless every place where an image of my heart shall be exposed and venerated". I plucked this cast aside altar from atop a trash can, when a neighbor moved. The boys and I laughed that "someone threw Jesus away". Jesus' blond hair creeped me out. I touched Jesus up. Jesus' exposed burning heart entwined in thorns creeped out my kids. I painted over it for a time. Some images may work for us- some may need to be recast, but every description of a Holy moment like "hearts on fire" or "our eyes were opened" are poor reflections of the reality of Christ's appearance. Timothy (2 Tim 2:14) warns us "not to wrangle over words." Jesus tells us we are mistaken when we boast that "we see!" (John 9:41) Indeed, when we debrief our lives before Jesus, the righteous will ask " Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you?" (Matthew 25) Paul tells us that on earth "we only know in part, we only see indirectly, a cloudy image, a riddle, an enigma... but when only Faith, Hope and Love remain- everything will become clear." (1 Corinthians 13) And yet, our imperfect words make space for Christ, for Love, for Hope, for Faith to come into our conversation.

After Jesus appears Luke tells us of the second miracle: "Christ opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Jesus did not project a verse by verse PowerPoint "Prophecy Chart" onto the wall. We like to nail down and box up holy mysteries for mass consumption. Luke reminds us they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness." The awe of worship always holds some mystery, question, and even doubt. Authentic worship resists formulas. The Greek grammatical device used is called the divine passive: God is the unspoken actor who "opens eyes", "was made known" or "sets hearts on fire". Jesus tells us we must be born again, we must be born from above, we must be born of the Spirit that blows when and where it chooses. (John 3) These are not simplistic formulas but deep holy mysteries that deeply transform us so that we begin to Love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Love transforms us, where precise formulas can not.

With their eyes opened and their hearts lit, they run seven miles back into Community. They hear how "The crucified one appeared to Simon!" and remember how Jesus first appeared to Magdalene, Mary, Salome, and Joanna. The two friends tell their resurrection story of how Jesus appeared as a Stranger and "was made known in the breaking of the bread". As they shared their resurrection stories: Jesus appeared again standing in their midst. Friends let us rehearse our resurrection stories. Let us bring

tired hopes, burning questions and honest doubts. Let us share our journey together, for the Risen Christ promises to come abide with us when even two or three of us come together in Jesus' name. (Matthew 18:20) Amen.