

April 26, 2020 Sermon

Elusive God, companion on the way, you walk behind, beside, beyond; you catch us unawares. Break through the disillusionment and despair clouding our vision, that, with wide-eyed wonder, we may find our way and journey on as messengers of your good news. Amen.

We gather today, in this Easter resurrection season, knowing that there is hope, despite the anxiety surrounding us with this pandemic. Dr. Bonnie Henry stated recently: "It is not even the beginning of the end... but we are somewhere near the end of our beginning." That is true hope, I feel, that we are turning a corner, and as we journey together, we can continue to be companions to one another.

April 22, 2020 was the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. It's a day to show our care for the earth and to recognize the challenges faced by many of the world's poorest people as they struggle to adapt to changing weather patterns and grow enough food to feed their families. This year, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Foodgrains Bank senior policy advisor Naomi Johnson asked us to remember those doubly impacted.

Those who are already vulnerable, including the poor, elderly, disabled, women and girls, indigenous people and people in conflict zones,

are bearing additional hardships during this crisis. And then there are vulnerable populations who are not only coping with a global pandemic but are dually affected by the impacts of climate change.

In Zimbabwe, farmers who have been faced with months of drought are now coping with market closures, making it nearly impossible for them to get enough food or earn a livelihood. Residents in the small island nations of the South Pacific have been grappling with how to balance disaster response from Cyclone Harold with controlling the spread of COVID-19. Adding to this hardship, crops destroyed during the disaster are further contributing to food insecurity in these communities.

The solution to this unprecedented challenge requires a global response. There are no borders to these challenges: We're all in this together, and we should all respond together. We must continue supporting the poor and marginalized, including girls and women, and those faced with compounding hardships due to climate change. And so we are companions on the journey.

Friends, in today's scripture reading, are making their way from one place – a place of hope-turned-into-despair, a place of perplexity and the unbelievable tales of women – to another place: Emmaus. In The

Magnificent Defeat, Frederick Buechner writes evocatively of the many ways we seek to find a place, an Emmaus, to run to when we have lost hope or don't know what to do, a place of escape, of forgetting, of giving up, of deadening our senses and our minds and maybe our hearts, too. But we need to remember we're on the road together.

The community of faith, of course, is called to support the "opening of their eyes" – of all of our "eyes," really, because we, as the church, are truly "companions on the road" – and it's fitting that the word "companion" is rooted in the words for "bread" and "with." Surely, we are on this road, the journey of faith, together.

What happens when bread is broken?

I love breaking bread. Not just during communion, which sadly we haven't been able to celebrate for some time, but I feel that every time I have bread with ANY meal, especially a dinner roll, I don't use my bestest manners and cut it with a knife, I use my hands, as Jesus did, and break the bread apart, remembering the loving care he had when he broke bread with his disciples in so many feasts, including the one we heard today.

When bread is broken, we hear beautiful narratives of resurrection appearances that are powerful stories of community, of believers, doubters,

and strugglers gathering and breaking apart, and gathering again, coming together and telling the stories of their experiences, sharing their memories of Jesus – his acts and his words – and then, like people of faith today, shining the light of Scripture on that experience and coming to new understandings and new inspiration.

But that's not all. They sit down at table together and break bread, and often, more than intellectual understanding, they come to see with their hearts what was right before them all along.

What are stories from your own life, when your eyes and your heart and your mind were opened because someone welcomed you, or because you opened your own heart, your door, your phone, your email, your facebook, your life, to a stranger, someone you never expected to be a blessing to you? What are you experiencing as we gather in virtual worship, as we are companions together?

If the world of the disciples had been turned upside down by the life and teachings of this person Jesus, think of how that same world had been "rocked" by his death. Even so, they haven't had time to absorb that calamity when new stories have sprung up.

Think of times when the news, or your own life, unfolded in ways that shook the foundations of what you believed in, what you counted on, perhaps too fast for you to process and integrate into your understanding. What did you do to find peace and balance, and to build new foundations?

Certainly, our present struggle with the pandemic that is raging around the world – a struggle that, ironically, has the power to unite us globally in remarkable and unprecedented ways – has caused many of us to follow the news and to feel anxious in ways we have never before imagined. Many, but of course not all of us, are used to a measure of everyday safety in our lives; however, the threat of this pernicious virus has shaken the foundations of that kind of security. Like those disciples long ago, we're trying to integrate new information and experience into our old worldview. We may feel especially anxious and uncertain about what the future will bring.

We are unsure about what to count on. We wonder if there will be enough of the things we need, not just for the enjoyment of life but indeed for its very preservation. We worry about our own health and even more about the health of our loved ones, and our neighbors and friends...and strangers, too, all of God's children at risk.

The invisible enemy that provokes all this anxiety is hard to fight, and in the midst of that fear, uneasy resentments arise, blame and frustration abound, and suspicion and division ensue. We're not sure what to believe, or what to think, or what to expect, or even what to dare hope for.

Perhaps, then, we can relate a bit to those disciples long ago, trying to make sense of life after losing the One who had brought new meaning, new hope, new trust to their lives. Where was the next chapter of their story leading them, in the midst of this sorrow and loss?

The good news is that God is still God, always. And the Bible tells us that God is good and generous and can be counted on, in every age and every circumstance.

Many people on social media are making the light-hearted observation that waking up in quarantine each day is a bit like the movie, "Groundhog Day," in which Bill Murray's character relives the same day over and over again. Isn't it a source of comfort and strength and perhaps courage to remember that every day we wake up to God's mercies, new again each morning?

In times of fear, but also courage, we are hearing, more and more, that there are lessons to be learned in the midst of our troubles and

uncertainty and our fears, lessons about generosity, about sharing with strangers who then become unexpected sources of hope and help, of not fearing the "Other".

Sharing medical advances and data, caring for one another (neighbours we have never met!) and speaking up for those hit hardest by the disaster (because for many, it is exactly that, bringing devastation of many kinds), finding creative ways to nurture community and friendship and family across "social" distances...these are all expressions of hospitality and generosity.

We are called to be generous toward, and supportive of, the frontline workers in both hospitals and grocery stores; we're called to open our hearts and minds and eyes to the reality of the suffering of our sisters and our brothers. How will we respond?

The spirit is fed when we are fully engaged in mission, but we also need times of quiet, of reflection and meditation, of deep prayer and meaningful worship, of spiritual growth through the arts and through nature. I feel this time of pandemic has allowed us to re-connect with family in different ways, to open creative ways to stay in contact with others, to offer

worship in ways that transcends church walls, but still nurtures our souls and spirit.

There's the added challenge of offering hospitality while we are all having to practice social distancing in a way that makes gathering in our church buildings impossible. Perhaps, if we could see ourselves and those we consider "other" in new ways, we might practice a new humility and graciousness in sharing the blessings of God more generously, more equitably. What creative ways are you finding (and sharing) to welcome spiritually hungry people to the table, even if that table is a symbolic one?

Intellectual hospitality, and hospitality of the heart, both open our lives to the stories, suffering, gifts and hopes of others. But it takes a lot of practice, and the change of heart and mind it requires, often presents a difficult challenge to what has become our deeply entrenched comfort zones. It requires our eyes – or better our hearts – to be opened to what is right before us.

We're not just hearing/reading a story about something that happened to other people, long ago and far away. The same amazing things, the wonderful works of God, are happening here, today, in our lives, too, if we open our eyes and see, and then, maybe our hearts, too, will burn

within us. When we struggle with questions of meaning and we just can't understand what's happening around us, the answer is often right before us.

So much in this Sunday's reading, as in all of Scripture, calls for our response. If our response to all of this good news, and to the call of a gracious, generous, hospitable, compassionate and still-speaking God, is to "love one another deeply from the heart," how will our lives look and feel different than they do now?

I read a powerful statement recently that says: "One day you will tell YOUR story of how you've overcome what you are going through and it will become part of someone else's survival guide". When we struggle with questions of meaning and we just can't understand what's happening around us, the answer is often right before us. We need to be aware of the companions on the road. Amen.