

“Stranger Things”

Sermon by Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Luke 24:13-35

Have you ever been near to someone who went through something terrible? I don't mean locked your keys in the car in the pouring rain terrible; I mean heart-ripping, shocking, shake-your-fists-at-God terrible.

In my years of ministry, I have walked with people through a handful of those kinds of terrible situations. It is a curious thing to feel this kind of vicarious trauma. Do I find it so troubling because I love and care for the person it has hurt so much? Or is there something more universal and less specific in feeling the upset of a world that should be ordered and just, where babies don't die, where a teenager's moment of careless thinking doesn't cost a life, where a mother and her children don't have to flee their home out of fear of her husband's violent rages, where the expected sunset years become an eclipse after the discovery of a terminal illness?

You do not have to be a pastor to encounter people who go through these kinds of things. You only have to be human. If you are human, at some point or points you inhabit that strange place, where you teeter between hope and despair, between life and death, between trust in the world and the God who created it and you, and a sense of betrayal by the universe and perhaps God, who seems to have let you down.

My family recently purchased a car that has something called Eyesight Technology. It is mostly a good thing and will keep me a safe driver, but I would be lying if I did not admit that the occasional correcting “beep beep beep!” with the slightest swerve out of a lane doesn't annoy me. For that reason, I call it the Nanny Car. In a TV commercial for my new Nanny Car, there is the scene of an ambulance pulling a mother and son out of a car

crash. We see them in the hospital. If only they had Eyesight Technology!... then the commercial backs up and replays the moments before the crash, when the *car* sees the heavy truck in front of them and quickly applies the brakes even though the young driver's reflexes had not responded in time. The mom gives her son a look as if to say, "You need to watch it, young man," which is clearly a much better outcome than mother and son lying side by side in hospital beds.

The lives and bodies God gives us to inhabit do not have this feature.

Following Jesus' death, two followers were in that strange place. Their faces looked sad. They were on the road to Emmaus—another kind of strange place, which is only mentioned once in the Bible, and doesn't seem to exist in historical records. Frederick Buechner said "Emmaus is the place where 'we throw up our hands and say 'Let the whole damned thing go to hang. It makes no difference anyway.'" On their way to this strange place, they were discussing the events of the past days: the trial, crucifixion, burial... "we had hoped he was the one, the one to redeem Israel..." and then the absurd, these rumors that the women from their group had shared, that they had seen the risen Jesus. This last bit of speculation was indeed a strange thing, for these two followers, Cleopas and the woman or man who also traveled with him had not only never heard of Eyesight Technology; they only had witnessed death from the side of life, and had never seen anyone dip into the side of death only to return to the side of life.

That is why when Jesus approached them, their eyes were kept from recognizing him. They could only see him as a stranger. They were still inhabiting that strange space between hope and despair, between life and death, between trust and betrayal, and all these good things— hope, life, trust—seem to have been crucified with Jesus. This loss eclipsed the fact that Jesus was standing right in front of them, and made him simply a stranger.

One thing I have found as a pastor is that while I do not take any joy or satisfaction in accompanying people who have experienced trauma and grief, I do find that the Holy Spirit can use me to add hope. This is not because I have any magical phrases that make things better. I know from experience that most words are cheap if they try to make comfortable a situation that is horrible. Words cannot do this. What I do know how to do is to point the way to ordinary things that make up life. Sometimes, what I give is as ordinary as offering a drink of water and suggesting a nibble on some bread. It may be so simple as stepping outside to take a walk. If I can convince people to do these things, perhaps I can assure them that they can make it through just one day. And once they make it through one day, days turn to weeks, and weeks to months, and one day a person wakes up and finds that for at least that morning, they wake up to hope instead of despair. Over time, there are more mornings of hope than there are of despair, more reasons to choose life than to grasp death, more reasons to trust the world and the people in it, and the God who loves it, than to feel betrayed by these.

In a similar way, Jesus did the basic things with Cleopas and his companion. Jesus walked with them, one step in front of the other, until they arrived in Emmaus. When they got to the village, it was late. And so these two voyagers did what any decent Middle-Easterner would do: they offered some dinner. And it was over the ordinary act of sharing a meal, when Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and shared it with them, that their eyes were opened. They saw this man was no stranger: it was Jesus. And as quickly as this realization dawned on them, Jesus was gone. That same hour they turned to make the 7-hour trek back to Jerusalem, where they saw the 11 disciples (remember, Judas is no longer in the picture). "The Lord is risen indeed!" they exclaim. No longer are these two in the strange place between hope and despair, between life and death, between trust and betrayal. Like Jesus, they had made it to the other side, and were then ready to proclaim even stranger things to those around them.

Hebrews 13:2 advises, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” I believe God sometimes meets us in strange places and through strange people. I have told you that I have walked with people through strange times, and tried to help point them on the way toward hope, life, and trust. But I have also been in strange places, times when despair, death, and betrayal called my name more clearly than did hope, life and trust. I have already told this congregation about losing my mom when she had a sudden heart attack while visiting me. I want to tell you now about a strange encounter I had in the weeks after her death. I will read from a journal entry I made after my first visit to the therapist I went to see for my grief. It was a time of panic and anxiety, and a time when simply putting one foot in front of the other felt like a nuisance.

I took the EI train into the city yesterday so that I could talk about my grief following my mom’s very sudden death. Since I live and work in the same neighborhood, I rarely take the EI and had forgotten that they had replaced the old cars with new ones, cars that line the seats against the wall rather than two-by two facing forward (well, they also faced backwards, but I would always choose forward-facing seats because I like to know what is ahead of me). Sitting against the wall of the train, my body felt loose and uncontained as the train jostled me from side to side. I missed my forward-facing seat, where I could see where I was going and brace myself for sudden stops and starts.

Ding-dong! I arrived at my stop, and followed the sea of people that then dispersed into each direction. I found my direction and headed to the building where I would be counseled.

For an hour, I described my loss and my grief to someone I had just met.

Afterward, I retraced my steps to the El. After walking to find an empty part of the platform not too far from other people, I grasped the iron grating while awaiting the train—because, you never know what wind or sudden act might sweep me into the line of the oncoming train. Two brown trains came and went. While I awaited my green train, a stranger approached me, caught my eye and asked “Do you believe that one person can be the bearer of happiness so contagious that it spills out to everyone around? “

I eyed him suspiciously, and gauged the distance of the oncoming train. Whooooosh. Once the train safely passed us and screeched to a halt, I answered. Yeah. Sure. The man then opened a box I had not even noticed he had. In it were 3 origami birds. He smiled at me and silently gestured for me to take one. I felt like a cat as I scooped a crumpled bird out of its paper box nest, clutching it lightly between two fingers lest unknown substance like anthrax or weirdness seep out and infect me, my house or my family.

Ding dong! The doors opened and I found my seat on the bench. I left the baby bird in the seat beside me, and out the window saw the man grinning at me still while the train left the platform. We turned the corner and stopped at the next elevated stop. The train filled, and the seats beside me were taken. The woman to my left lowered her bottom onto the baby bird of happiness. I felt somehow relieved.

Encompassed by people, contained by their bodies on either side of me, the stopping and starting of the train did not jostle me but instead rocked me into a safe place. I closed my eyes and breathed. When I heard the train announce my stop, I finally opened my eyes. Although the train had mostly emptied, my seatmates were still beside me. We stood and exited the train together, and then went our separate ways.

That day still stands out to me in my head, and as I continued visiting my grief therapist, the strange train ride into the city for therapy became my

Emmaus Road, a symbol of movement from despair to hope, from death to life, from betrayal to trust. Perhaps the strange encounter with the origami man announcing a happiness I did not yet believe in set the expectation for what this train ride could bring. I am convinced that God shows up to meet us on the road, in our strange places, to lead us into the life to which Jesus calls us to live abundantly.

May God make us open to how the strangers and strange places in our lives can open us up to holy presence, to life, and to healing. Amen.