

“But We Had Hoped”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
April 26, 2020
E-worship 10:30 am

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
Luke 24:13-35

As I begin to preach to our virtual church this morning, I want to summon the bravery of Paul, who proclaimed the gospel even during imprisonment. I want to embody the presence of the women who met Jesus at the empty tomb and ran forth, proclaiming resurrection to all who had not yet seen. I would even be happy to have the prove-it-to-me faith of Thomas, who needed to see and touch Jesus' wounds before he could proclaim, “My Lord and my God” to the Resurrected One.

But what I fear is that I have to offer you is more of a “huh.” Which is not that spectacular to listen to. Especially after the novelty of the first couple weeks of virtual worship has worn off, and the celebration of Easter-- a joy we all needed during this pandemic, has faded. Thankfully, this week I have the company of Cleopas and whoever he was traveling with. Like them, I feel sadness. Like them, I keep replaying what has happened these past days-- especially the losses. Like them, I had hoped it would be different.

“But we had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel,” Cleopas and his companion told the stranger they could not recognize. I could shout an “Amen!” to that:

“But we had hoped the schools would be open by now!”
“But we had hoped that there would be enough tests!”
“But we had hoped it would be just like the flu!”
“But we had hoped you couldn't get sick from it twice!”
“But we had hoped there would be a cure by now!”

My home state of Georgia has leaned in pretty deeply to these hopes-- to the point that they are opening *certain* businesses again, before the curve has flattened and before medical and scientific experts recommend. My fear is that this decision to favor businesses over lives has a political motivation: by rendering certain businesses as free to open, those who then *choose* to stay closed or to not work for their safety or for that of their families and community, are now considered “voluntarily unemployed,” and no longer eligible for unemployment benefits. In Georgia, a large percentage of people who work these jobs are brown or black, and are now forced into an impossible choice: should I work at risk to the health of myself and those around me, or should I enter into a poverty that has no safety net?

Huh.

It is hard to see or feel God in all this.

I wonder what our prayers to God are sounding like right now. I kind of picture it like an elementary school Zoom meeting. When my daughter has her Zoom meetings with her teacher twice a week, the first 5-10 minutes are filled with children's faces filling out the boxes on the screen, as they instruct each other how to add virtual backgrounds, or get their sound working, and they excitedly chatter with one another-- except you cannot hear a thing they are saying, because each child wants to show-and-tell their cool toy, or introduce their dog, or promote a fun website they had discovered in quarantine. And here's the thing: a 7 or 8 year old has a remarkable ability to repeat as many times as needed until someone-- could be the teacher but another classmate will do-- says, "Oh! Look at that drawing you made that you have now mentioned 55 times! I love your use of color and can see how much cheer it adds to your room!" Instead of quietly waiting and listening so that everyone has a turn, the second grade solution is to keep repeating yourself, louder and louder each time.

My prayers to God have not been as joyful as a group of 24 second graders, but they have been as insistent. I pray for mercy and miracles, even though I know God is not a puppeteer pulling the strings of cause and effect on this pandemic, causing it to swell or fade as God pleases. Still, I have faith that God might intervene or break through *somehow*. And so, I keep repeating myself, and I am sure you are too. At the heart of my prayer is "Look at me! Pay attention to me!" and sure, if I get some of that attention, I will be happy to share it with you and with a suffering world.

How I would like to be like the Psalmist we read today, proclaiming, "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he has inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live." And it is clear that the Psalmist had been through some tough times-- namely, the snares of death and the pangs of Sheol, distress and anguish. Let me confess to you that I have total *Schadenfreude* when it comes to the Bible. If the word is new to you, *Schadenfreude* is the pleasure you get from someone else's misfortunes. Under normal circumstances, I have had deep compassion and have even wept for the suffering of my foremothers and forefathers in the Bible. But these days, I look back at them and take more than a little satisfaction in the truth that what we are dealing with is not nearly as bad as what *they* -- the Hebrew people and the early followers of Christ experienced. When I am disappointed that the grocery store doesn't have lasagna sheets, I think, "well, the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness had to live on manna and quail for 40 years!" When I lament being exiled from school, parties, theater, vacation, and Saturday morning soccer games, I think of the Hebrews living in exile in Babylon, far from their community treasures, without the spirit even to sing as they wept by the river. Maybe it is not so much pleasure that I take from these forbears' suffering, as much as companionship and strength: if they can make it, *so can we*. And once we make it, we too will join in the Psalmist's praise, "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice."

But in all our clamoring for God to hear our voice, what if God is already among us, and we can't even recognize her? There is something in the gospel passage that tells me that in my struggle to get God's attention, to make God hear me, I may not be taking the chance to listen to God. Cleopas and his companion talk on and on, Godsplaining to the "stranger" about the traumas they have seen, and the loss of hopes they had held, but they could not see or recognize that the stranger they were telling these things to was Jesus himself! This is classic behavior for people who are survivors of trauma-- their minds stay on a traumatic loop, replaying whatever awful experience they had witnessed; each time there is the hope that the loop will be different-- but it will never be different unless something interrupts it.

In her book *Trauma and Grace*, Theologian Serene Jones speaks of three steps of moving through trauma:

*First, the person or persons who experienced the trauma must be able to tell their story. Second, there needs to be someone to witness this testimony, a third-party presence that not only creates a safe space for speaking but also receives the words when they are finally spoken. Third, the testifier and the witness must begin the process of telling a new, different story together; we must begin to pave a different way through the brain.*¹

Now, this process can be difficult; it can take many years, and it may never even happen; I had a parishioner in another church who had been drafted into the Vietnam War, but since he had just had his first child, his older brother took his spot for him. The elder brother came back from Vietnam, but he never spoke a word about what happened there. Still, you could tell that it had a profound impact on him in ways he could not share as he suffered silently-- and his younger brother, who never went to Vietnam, harbored this trauma too in his own way, that played out into the next generation, who was finally able to speak about these hidden traumas, and try to make a different story for their lives and the next generation.

If you look at Cleopas and his buddy, they are working through these traumas. They are telling the story as best they could see it. But when Jesus repeats it back to them, he places it into a much bigger context, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. He follows that testimony with a meal-- a simple meal of bread, and it is in that bodily breaking of the bread-- such an ordinary comfort-- that the two followers actually open their eyes, and can see the Risen Christ, and realize that the story has become something new, beyond even what they had hoped for.

So let's follow the Holy Stranger's lead, and zoom out from our local interpretations of what is happening, and *try* to tell this part of our story in a larger story, one that includes suffering, yes, but also is a repeating testimony to survival, salvation, and transformation.

¹ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*

To see the big picture, look also for small things that can ground us into Jesus' story of salvation. For Cleopas and his buddy, it was the ordinary act of breaking bread that opened their eyes that they could see the Risen Christ among them. Last week, I was wading in the world of ideas, trying to find some profound pearl of wisdom, but finding despair instead. It was actually a child-- a second grader-- who brought to me the mercy and miracle of the Risen Christ among us. Rebeca from our church sent me a song that she composed-- first, the words, then, a recording of her voice singing it. Her words are a testimony:

“God brings us here. He brings us up. He helps us when times that are tough.
He is Lord, he brings life to us.
On the ground he gives us Power, Power.
He helps us, and we all stand together with God.”

Although she cannot physically see or hear God, she feels God's presence alive within and beyond her and knows it is forming and shaping the world, and it is forming and shaping her. But there *is* hope!

Huh. Amen.