

Hope on the Road

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It has been two years since I have preached an Easter sermon to a room of people. At MIPC, we didn't begin worshipping in-person until the summer of 2021 after 16 months of pre-filming ourselves for worship to post online. The hard truth of life for us, and maybe for many of you, is this: we are nearing the end of 2021, and I still haven't seen over half of the congregation since before the pandemic began. I'm hoping this fact might change come Christmas Eve (2021) as we are offering both indoor *and* outdoor service options, but I think it is very likely that this year, Easter Day will come—and maybe go—and there will still be many faces I haven't looked upon for more than two full years. I am not saying these are people dropping their church affiliation or membership. I just do not know where they are, and I am praying that each of them experiences the radical mystery, hope, and promise of Easter.

Seattle, and the Pacific Northwest in general, is a place where people have lived fairly cautiously when it comes to Covid-19. But that isn't all that is going on in our overall lack of community life. There is also something to be said for living in a place that began social distancing decades ago, not out of safety, but as a general way of life. Seattleites have a negative reputation for being unwelcoming, dating back to the 1920's. One local reporter wrote that while many people experience *FOMO* (*fear of missing out*), in Seattle there is something called the *JOMO* (*joy of missing out*).¹ People hear about a party and politely decline, finding joy in the fact that they can stay home and read instead. Clearly this is not everyone at all times in life. At church, before Covid-19, we still drew a great crowd for a potluck or a camping trip. There are regulars at church who love to stay after for coffee hour. At the same time, the pandemic took a community that, as a whole, was skeptical of institutions and community experiences—people who would rather be alone than in a group—and gave them a reason not to show up to the one place where they regularly gathered in community: church. Unfortunately, while everyone was home, happy to miss out on social life, the pain of the world didn't stop. National, world, and local news has highlighted inequity, pain, and injustice that comes at the hands of greed and fear, and there was no place to process this together. Behind closed doors, often unseen, people have been wrestling with lost jobs, divorces, mental health crises, loneliness, anger, apathy, and all the fear and grief that has come with the pandemic.

More than ever, people need the hope and promise of Easter. Everywhere. They need the surprise and awe of the risen Jesus, who sees us no matter where we are and shows us that there is nothing that can separate us from him, not even death on a cross. I can and will write that sermon this year, yet I don't know where my congregation will be on Easter morning.

As I think about Easter 2022, I am drawn to the story of the two men on the road to Emmaus as the primary focus of Easter Day. These are two people who had known the community of faith and yet, when their hopes were dashed, left the group deeply disappointed, and walked away. They were disappointed because they didn't see justice come to pass, disappointed because they thought Jesus would liberate them, disappointed in their leaders who handed Jesus over to be crucified, disappointed

because the story of hope and possibility, as they saw it, was over.

Their desperation and their movement away from the larger group is exactly where I see this text meeting the people in my community right now. It is exactly where I pray that Jesus will meet the people in my community and in this world right now, walking on a road, wondering where it all went wrong. In Luke 24:13, we meet these two people, walking and talking, trying to accept the world where what they had hoped for had not come to pass.

I am fascinated to know the details of the conversation. I wonder about their history with Jesus and how they first learned about him. I wonder how deeply they knew him, if at all, or if they ever spoke to him or had heard him preach, or what they expected Jesus, this “mighty prophet,” would do in their world and lives. I am curious where they were when he was killed. Luke doesn’t tell us. All we know is that they were talking “about these things that had happened.” One vague sentence to capture the miles of talking. The miles of silence. The miles of reflection and questions and frustration shared between these two. One sentence to process the depth and pain of all that had happened. Into that conversation, Jesus shows up, as a stranger, and asks them a very pastoral question: “What are you talking about as you walk along?”

His question is one I would want to ask dozens of people I haven’t seen over these last many months. What have they been talking about as they walk along in life? Is there a common thread in the stories of those who have walked away from church? Or those who have just fallen out of the habit of coming? What about those who are angry with God? Or are they having major doubts in their faith? “What are you talking about as you walk along?” I wonder. The conversations have to be telling.

One of the members of my congregation, Heidi Thiese, wrote this poem in 2020 and shared it with me:

I wonder at this sudden change
A collective loss
We must navigate alone

I hold fragile hearts and big feelings
Chase new monsters from
Interrupted dreams

I zoom from classes to calls
A perpetual purgatory
Willing calm into uncertainty

I embrace a new
Introverts’ paradise
Reveling in talk no longer small

I escape to Hogwarts and Narnia and Pemberley
Words dripping magic
Unto monotony

I watch spring unfold
Nature's undisturbed consistency
Bringing resurrected hope

I wonder what promise
Our wilderness wanderings
Will deliver

It seems today that we are all walking along holding fragile hearts and big feelings, those of our own, our kids, our parents, our neighbors. I love the line about living in a world where the talk is no longer small. That happens in times of crisis, especially in a time of social distancing. We have lost the 15 second interactions with people on elevators. No more "I like your shoes," or "have a nice day" in the grocery store because it's hard to talk with a mask on, and we have trained ourselves to stand farther away from people. Unnecessary moments with strangers are a memory. We are living in a world where talk is no longer small, which sounds nice in theory but is hard for many of us. Throughout our lives, most of us pad the big talk, the discussions about religion and relationships and worry and fear, with some of the smaller stuff. Because it's polite. And easy. Because it's non-threatening and doesn't require much emotion or thought. Once we move away from the small talk, we dive into a world few of us are ready for, a world limited to silence and deep conversation.

At a church retreat with a former congregation, we once asked a man to come speak who was truly brilliant. He was engaging, thoughtful, theological. And as I went with my colleague, Mark, to pick up our speaker from the airport, Mark said to me, "Kristy, just be prepared. Don doesn't do small talk."²

I responded casually, "Oh good. I get really tired talking about the weather."

Mark paused, then said, "No, Kristy, really. You need to mentally prepare because it's disarming. Don literally does not *know how* to talk small."

It turns out, even with the warning, I was unprepared to meet Don. Mark introduced us on the curb outside the Asheville airport and, as we put Don's bags in the car, Don asked, "Kristy, tell me, how has the work you've done this year aided in your own spiritual formation?"

"Yes..." I almost responded to this man I had just met, "I grew up in a Seattle suburb with two brothers. And I love to read..."

What are you talking about as you walk along?

This is Jesus' question, and when he asks it, the conversation is anything but small. They begin by telling him the big newest news of the day (Jesus' death), moving quickly into their experience of it all, the possibilities they had hoped for, and then the desperation they experienced. They even shared their struggle understanding some friends back in Jerusalem who had some strange ideas about an empty tomb. Their talk was personal and honest, vulnerable and deep. They shared the views on the state of the world and how it had led to hope, unmet.

In 2017, Ta-Nehisi Coates was making the rounds on talk shows and podcasts to promote his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*. It was his interview on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* that really stuck out to me. Toward the end of the interview, Colbert commented that he'd seen Coates in other interviews, and it seemed to him that Coates had a hard time expressing hope that things will get better in the United

States. Then he asked Ta-Nehisi Coates directly, “Do you have any hope tonight for the people out there (pointing to the audience at home) about how we could be a better country, how we could have better race relations, how we could have better politics?”

Without much hesitation, Coates said, “No.” There was awkward laughter in the audience. Then he went on, with great sincerity, “But I’m not the person you should go to for that. You should go to your pastor. Your pastor provides you hope. Your friends provide you hope. In better times the President of the United States provides you hope...; that’s not my job.”

This wasn’t the answer Colbert was looking for. “I’m not asking you to make sh-- up,” he said. “I’m asking if you personally see any *evidence* for change in America.”

Coates responded, “Maybe, maybe...but I would have to make sh-- up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.”³

I found this interview so telling. Stephen Colbert, like so many of us, was looking for an expert to tell him that the landscape of the world is looking more positive. That is what people are looking for every day, someone with credentials or a unique experience to affirm the things we wish for, especially when we cannot see it for ourselves. We want a visible sign that the moral arc of the universe is bending toward justice. We want those who are scholars of race and politics to tell us that there is hope. We want the statistics to point to better outcomes. We want David Attenborough’s voice, at the end of the documentary *Our Planet*, telling us that “it doesn’t have to be this way.” We are looking for evidence of change for the better.

In the Seattle area, where I serve, people do not frequently begin their search for hope with a faith community. For the most part people are not anti-church. They simply don’t take church or faith into consideration. Instead, Pacific Northwesterners seek hope based on what we observe and on what makes sense. We look for hope in statistics and polls and expert reviews. We look for hope in our own abilities, in all that we can accomplish.

I serve and am a part of a community that reminds me a lot of the two men on the road to Emmaus. They had high hopes that they would see a world changed. They heard the stories of Jesus and thought he could be the real deal, the one to redeem Israel. They believed liberation was at hand...right up until the moment it wasn’t.

I do not know the reason they stuck around Jerusalem after Jesus’ death for three days before heading toward Emmaus. Maybe they were in shock. Or maybe they thought someone else might take Jesus’ place, thinking that Peter or James could step into the role of prophet.

Whatever it was, they were around long enough to hear the women when they came back from the tomb early on Easter morning. These women came back with the most miraculous and incredible story—they had found an empty tomb, and then angels told them that Jesus was alive! Yet their words were like a dream that didn’t make sense. Clearly, they thought, these women were speaking nonsense. They were not the authority on this topic. And an empty tomb was not anywhere in their limited imaginations.

These two followers of Jesus had very little capacity to envision the mystery, hope, and promise at hand. They could not look beyond their own experiences and expectations to see the miracle of the day. Jesus’ death destroyed all their hopes. For

them, when Jesus died, so did the promises of the Kingdom. They heard this tale of an empty tomb and set out on their way, filled with disappointment because the world they were living in, the one they understood, was too small for the miracle of Easter.

Walking a road of disappointment is a theme in our common life. This pandemic has been a crash course for people of all ages in disappointment—everything from not being with loved ones when they die to a child desperate for a chance to have recess when school is closed. Those who have been working toward social justice for a lifetime are disappointed in the slow change, and those who have just begun the world are realizing the long, hard work it takes to move the needle a small amount. We are disappointed in our political system, our economics, our ability to care for the planet. We are disappointed in ourselves and what we haven't done. We know disappointment. We have looked for ways that this world could be better, signs that it is improving, ways we can make it better, and we have come up empty.

As Jesus approached these disciples, he did so as a stranger. "What are you talking about as you walk along?" he asked. The question brought stillness to the moment. They didn't know it, but they were in the presence of the resurrected Christ. The risen Jesus entered into their world, changing the landscape of the story completely. "What are you talking about as you walk along?" From the stillness they went on to share their story of grief. Jesus didn't interrupt them. He didn't correct them. He gave them room to name what they were feeling. And then he spoke with a great amount of authority about himself, about the things they did not see because their vision of the world and of scripture was too limited. His words must have been compelling because the two on the road begged him to stay, even as he was about to leave.

He wanted them to believe. They were compelled, but they didn't get it. They couldn't open their eyes to life out of death, to hope that came in this way. They remind me of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* when she is talking with the White Queen. At some point, the Queen tells Alice that she is 105 years old.

"I can't believe *that!*" Alice says.

"Can't you?" The queen responds in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There is no use trying," she says. "One can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," the Queen tells her. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!"⁴

These men had practiced hoping in the things they could know and see. They had very little experience, very little practice hoping and believing in *impossible* things. The message of Easter is an impossible message. Jesus died and then *God raised Jesus from the dead*. Jesus is alive, now, sharing with all the impossible, mysterious, hopeful promise that death will never have the last word. That new life is possible in every place we look, on every road we walk, in every disappointment, and in all despair. This message is what we need today, and we need it not just in church, but on the road. We need it in our pain and our apathy. We need it because, as hard as we look, we aren't finding this hope anywhere else. Our vision is skewed by our own

limitations rather than opening our eyes, together, to the movement of God. This day. In this world. Breaking in to bring life in all the places where we are looking *and* all the places where we have given up.

Jesus broke bread with these two, and their eyes were open. They understood it all in the table, in the blessing, breaking, and giving in love. They had expected none of this. They didn't see it coming. It was thrilling and terrifying, and it had them changing directions, heading back to Jerusalem. Their world opened up to a miracle that cannot be explained in any rational way. Their eyes were opened because Jesus walked with them in their pain, listened to their story, and made himself known to them as they broke bread and opened scripture. Jesus found them. The two who couldn't find hope, even when it was right before their eyes, Jesus found them.

Jesus invites us along with the early church to see the radical mystery, hope, and promise of Easter. A world that God makes bigger through power beyond our rational seeing and our best statistics. Beyond our best efforts and our own work. We need the inbreaking of Easter for this kind of hope for everyone who gathers and everyone who is out on the road this year. The beauty of Easter is how Jesus finds each of us, wherever we may be.

Notes

1 Christine Clarridge, *The Seattle Times*, "Seattle Freeze: Forget Making Friends – half of Washington residents don't even want to talk to you," May 28, 2019.

2 The name of the person in this story has been changed.

3 Ta-Nehisi Coates and Stephen Colbert, "*The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*," October 03, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-xssa4BHUI>. I heard this story referenced in an Advent sermon entitled, "Yet," by Amy Miracle as well at Broadstreet Presbyterian Church, December 3, 2017.

4 Carroll, Lewis, *Through The Looking Glass*. United States: Macmillan, 1901), 88-89.