

Easter Sermon Series The Church: A Signpost of Hope – “Walking Together”

Luke 24: 13-35; Psalm 116: 1-6, 12-19

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Salem United Methodist Church

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The church is in the Easter Season. As Easter people the church is called to be a Sign Post of Hope for the world. During the Easter Season we will look at how the church on different levels is pointing to hope and being hope for the world as we serve a Risen Savior. Last week we celebrated how this congregation brings hope to children around the world through Compassion International. Today we will look at how each of us can provide hope by being a companion for the journey.

There were two mischievous boys, Tom and Danny. If there was any mischief that occurred in the neighborhood, these two were probably involved. Their mother didn't know what to do with them. She heard that the pastor at the local Methodist Church was great with youth so she asked him if he would talk with her sons. He agreed to meet with them individually. Tom went in to see the pastor first. The preacher had a deep booming voice and asked Tom sternly, “Do you know where God is, son?” Tom was shocked and didn't know how to respond. So the preacher asked again, but in a louder, sterner tone. “Do you know where God is, son?” Tom sat perfectly still and didn't say a word. So the preacher asked again and shook his finger, “Where is God?” Tom got up and ran out the room as fast as he could. He met up with Danny who was waiting outside to have his turn with the pastor. Tom gasping for breath said to Danny, “Come on we got to get out of here. We're in big trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it!”

On that Day of Resurrection Jesus was missing. Some thought his body was stolen, however, the women reported seeing the Risen Lord. For the followers of Jesus, their world had been turned upside down. This past week there had been celebration, betrayal, arrest, violence, and the crucifixion. Now they heard of that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were so confused. How could all this have happened? They didn't understand. Their first century Jewish view of the resurrection was one for all humanity at the end of time, but not just a solitary person. Their hopes were killed. Their dreams were destroyed. Their grief was overwhelming. At least two people decided to leave the community of disciples and return home to their pre-Jesus existence. After all, it was only seven miles down the road from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. But it was a hard journey. As they trudged down the road, their burdens were weighing them down. Then a stranger joins them, listens to their story of grief, and begins to explain what happened according the prophets. As was the custom of the day travelers were invited into homes for lodging, so these two disciples invite this stranger in. His identity was kept from them until he blessed and broke the bread. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized their Risen Lord. He vanishes, and they run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell Jesus is risen indeed!

All it took was a walk and a meal for their lives to be transformed. These two from Emmaus experienced a God moment. The Risen Jesus is revealed to them. They go from being down hearted and sullen to being exhilarated and joyful! They were no longer alone. Jesus had joined them as a companion on their journey. The word companion is an interesting word. It literally means “to break bread with.” The Latin *com* means “with” and *panis* means “bread.” Its origins may have come from this Resurrection story. Food and friendship go together. Whenever people gather, food is usually there. When people eat together, generosity and friendship are offered even if they are strangers. There usually is a sense of comfort and security at a shared meal. Maybe the pastor in the opening joke needs a course in companionship. A few cookies offered to the boys may have opened the door to some dialogue, friendship, or even the pastor being a companion for the boys' life journey.

Sharing a meal, opening the doors of the church for a House Tour, or inviting someone for coffee or lunch are just some of the ways we offer hospitality. Offering hospitality however, takes some risk and places the host or hostess in a vulnerable situation. Things could go very badly, or a new beautiful friendship could develop. Accepting hospitality takes some trust, too. The one who has been invited wonders, “Will I be accepted?” And the guest hopes that what they need will be met by the host/hostess. If all goes well, hospitality both offered and received becomes a doorway to grace, a doorway to hope.

In our 21st century highly technological world where people can communicate instantaneously, there still is a great need for hospitality and companionship. There is a great need for hope. People are hurting. Almost every family has some kind of trouble or hardship. People who are smiling on the outside may be crying on the inside, “Please God! Save my life!” Death may be staring them in the face. Hell may be hard on their heels. They may be up against it and not know which way to turn. Or be at the end of their rope. God is listening to their cries. God is hearing their pleas, but God needs someone to offer them compassion, companionship for the journey, and hope. So God created the church. It is in moments in which we reach out and offer a shared meal, a cup of coffee, a dessert, an open door, when we walk along side another and listen to them, Christ appears. A holy moment can occur in the blessing, the breaking, and giving of bread.

Those of us who have walked that Emmaus road, we know what it is like to be bogged down with burdens, hardships, pain, suffering, and loneliness. But we also know the joy we shared when we discovered the Risen Lord in our lives. We have run back to our Jerusalems telling what happened on our journeys, what happened in those holy moments, in the breaking of the bread. There are those today who are walking their Emmaus roads. Their burdens are heavy. Their grief is raw. Their hardships seem impossible. Their pain is unbearable. Their loneliness is all consuming. The Risen Christ is walking with them, but they may not recognize him. As a church we are called to walk along side them to let them know that they are not alone. We are to listen to their pain and offer hope until the Risen Christ is revealed to them.

We do this at Salem. We will risk ourselves for the sake of another. We will sacrifice our time and money to ease another’s burdens. We do it for both those who are part of the Salem community and we do it for those who live beyond the church walls. Salem means shalom or peace, a sense of wholeness. When one has shalom, one has hope. This hope is not some wishy washy optimism, but a hope of certainty, a hope of strong confident expectation that *God is real*, a hope that the *life* offered by God is real, a hope that *God’s love is real*, and a hope that *God’s grace is real*.

This kind of hope does not call us to live in isolation, but in community. Jesus joined the two who were alone and transformed their lives so a new community was created. They shared what they experienced with others. So God is calling us to join in with others as our lives are being transformed and create community- a community that still exists. Our God is not a God of isolation, but a communal one. God is always creating new space for another to experience a the community of faith. And sometimes it can begin in the simple act of the blessing and breaking of bread.

Reflection Questions: Do you need a companion for the journey? If so, who could be that companion? Ask them if they will join you?

And who do you know is walking alone and may be in need of a companion? How can you walk with them on their journey?

Resources: *Feasting With the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; “Let’s Go For A Walk” by Bruce Epperly, 4/28/2014, Living a Holy Adventure, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/>; “Evangelectionary for Sunday, May 4th, 3rd Sunday of Easter” by Heather Lear, <http://www.evangelismconnections.org/weeklyreflection/>; <http://www.altalang.com/beyond-words/2008/09/29/etymology-of-companion/>

