

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Easter Faith Doesn't Always Come Easily

It takes time to figure out that Jesus is alive.

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

Rev. Steve Filyk

April 11, 2020

First Sunday after Easter

Opening Hymn: At the dawning of salvation 248

Closing Hymn: Hail the day that sees Christ rise 265 (1-4)

Choruses: Jesus is risen from the grave 254 (1,4,5), Cornerstone (Hillsong)

Last Sunday didn't feel like Easter.

Some of you logged in at 10am
only to find that our livestreaming wasn't working.

You waited around for awhile and finally gave up.

Easter doesn't seem like Easter
when there's no worship to join in with.

But even for those who hung around,

Or watched the service later...
Easter might have rung a little hollow.

There was no church choir.

There was no brass band.
There were no young ladies in Easter dresses.
There were no older ladies in Easter hats.

Even the message seemed a little understated for the season.

We were told about an empty tomb
And the appearance of angels,
But in last week's Bible lesson,
Jesus didn't show up.

Last Sunday didn't feel like Easter.

Someone told me later during the week,
That they felt like they were still stuck in lent.

But Easter isn't a moment...

Easter is a season.
Easter is a time of growing awareness
Of the resurrection of Christ.

The chapter that we are continuing to explore this Sunday,

Luke 24, is part of the forty days
between resurrection and ascension
where Jesus opens the minds of his disciples.ⁱ

Dave already read the lesson...

Sometime during the day
 Following the women's early morning encounter
 At the empty tomb

Two disciples, one named Cleopas, and the other left unnamed,
 Are on the road to a suburb outside of Jerusalem.

They are probably heading home
 after the tumultuous weekend
 Where Passover had been celebrated
 And Jesus had been executed.

As they trudge the dusty highway
 They are talking aloud.
 They are reviewing everything that has happened,
 Trying to make sense of their dashed dreams.

Another traveller on the same road
 overhears their chatter
 and asks them what they are talking about.

Luke tells us that it is Jesus,
 But that his identity is hidden from them.

Into the middle of their discussion
 Jesus inserts himself
 and asks them what they are talking about.

They seem perturbed by the intrusion.
 Cleopas replies rather snarkily:

"Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem
 who does not know the things
 that have happened there in these days?"

The 'stranger' feigns ignorance:
 "What things?" he asks.

This time they chime in together
 "About Jesus of Nazareth...
 He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed
 before God and all the people.

The chief priests and our rulers
 handed him over to be sentenced to death,
 and they crucified him..."

but we had hoped
 that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” they lament.ⁱⁱ

They go on to share all the strange things
 That had happened earlier in the morning
 About the women finding the tomb empty
 And claiming to have seen angels.

And yet it is clear from their tone
 That this story, this dream is finished.
 They had bet their lives on the wrong savior.

But here the ‘stranger’ turns from inquirer into teacher.
 He responds by chiding them for their unbelief:
 “Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things
 and then enter his glory?” he asks them.ⁱⁱⁱ

Then he begins to teach them,
 All that Moses and the prophets
 Said about him.

We aren’t told what passages are discussed.
 I could imagine Isaiah being referenced:

“Surely he took up our pain
 and bore our suffering...
 he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities...”^{iv}

Or maybe one of the Psalms were quoted:

“Dogs surround me,
 a pack of villains encircles me;
 they pierce my hands and my feet.

All my bones are on display;
 people stare and gloat over me.
 They divide my clothes among them
 and cast lots for my garment.”^v

Those who know their Bibles
 Could imagine a variety of different Scriptures
 That Jesus might have been referring to.

As one commentator notes:
 “ The pattern of life emerging from death is...
 a fundamental pattern of the entire biblical saga.

From the original chaos God creates life.
 From the slavery of Egypt come freedom and homeland.
 From the destruction of exile comes a renewed people.

Jesus' interpretation of the Scriptures for the disciples
 gives them true understanding
 of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection;
 now their hearts "burn" within them."^{vi}

And yet the mind doesn't always understand
 What the heart is feeling.

It is not until later that evening,
 When they finally arrive at the village
 And persuade the 'stranger' to stay over with them.

It is not until they are sharing a meal with him
 And he takes the bread, breaks it, and shares it with them
 (Undoubtedly just like he did at the Passover meal
 He had celebrated with his disciples)

That the penny drops.
 It is then they recognise that the 'stranger'
 Is Jesus in their midst.

It is only then that faith gains a solid foothold
 And that they begin to understand for themselves
 That Jesus is alive.

Did Easter Sunday ring hollow for you this season?
 Maybe it has never been for you the event
 That other people get so excited about.

You have heard the testimony of others.
 You've heard the talk of the empty tomb,
 The visit of angels.
 You've heard story upon story
 From others who say that Jesus is alive
 And very real to them.

And yet you are still wondering whether he really is a risen Savior,
 Or at least your mind has yet to comprehend
 What you know in your heart.

Could it be that Jesus is speaking to you this Easter,
 Even in the absence of a familiar celebration?

Could it be in hearing the words of Scripture
 Or in the sharing of some bread and grape juice
 That you sense a truth, a reality
 That your mind in waiting to comprehend?

Former editor of the feminist website "The Toast"
 Nicole Cliff shared the story of her 'road to Emmaus',
 A few years ago in *Christianity Today*.

Here's a shortened account:

*I became a Christian on July 7, 2015,
 after a very pleasant adult life of firm atheism...*

*As an atheist since college,
 I had already mellowed a bit
 over the previous two or three years,
 in the course of running a popular feminist website
 that publishes thoughtful pieces about religion.*

*Like many atheists... I started out snarky and defensive about religion,
 but eventually came to think it was probably nice
 for people of faith to have faith.*

*[Now] there are two different starting points to my conversion,
 and sometimes I omit the first one,
 because I think it gives people an answer
 I don't want them to have.*

*It is a simple story: I was going through a hard time.
 I was worried about my child.
 One time I said "Be with me" to an empty room.
 It was embarrassing.*

I didn't know why I said it, or to whom...

*The second starting point...
 [happened while] I was surfing the Internet
 and came across John Ortberg's...
 obituary for philosopher Dallas Willard.*

*John's daughters are dear friends,
 and I have always had a wonderful relationship with their parents,
 who struck me as sweetly deluded in their evangelical faith,
 so I clicked on the article...*

*A few minutes into reading the piece, I burst into tears.
 Later that day, I burst into tears again.*

And the next day.

*While brushing my teeth, while falling asleep,
while in the shower, while feeding my kids,
I would burst into tears.*

*I should say here I am a happy, even-keeled soul...
Therefore, it was very unsettling
to suddenly feel like a boat being tossed on the waves.*

I wasn't sad, I wasn't frightened—I just had too many feelings.

*I decided to buy a Dallas Willard book to read anthropologically, of course.
I read his Hearing God. I cried.
I bought Lewis Smedes's My God and I. I cried.
I bought Sara Miles's Take This Bread. I cried.*

*It was getting out of hand.
You just can't go around crying all the time.*

*At this point, I reached a crossroads.
I sat myself down and said:
Okay, Nicole, you have two choices.*

*Option One: you can stop reading books about Jesus.
Option Two: you could think with greater intention
about why you are overwhelmed by your emotions...*

*So I emailed a friend who is a Christian,
and I asked if we could talk about Jesus....
She said she would be very happy to talk to me about Jesus...*

*[But] About an hour before our call, I knew: I believed in God.
Worse, I was a Christian.
It was the opposite of being punk rock.*

*Now, if you've been following along, you know already.
I was crying constantly while thinking about Jesus
because I had begun to believe that Jesus really was
who he said he was,*

*but for some reason,
that idea had honestly not occurred to me.
But then it did,
as though it always had been true.*

*So when my friend called, I told her,
awkwardly, that I wanted to have a relationship with God,*

and we prayed, and giggled a bit, and cried a bit,

*and then she sent me a stack of Henri Nouwen books,
and here we are today.*

*Since then, I have been dunked by a pastor in the Pacific Ocean
while shivering in a too-small wetsuit.*

*I have sung “Be Thou My Vision”
and celebrated Communion on a beach,
while weirded-out Californians tiptoed around me.*

*I go to church. I pray.
My politics have not changed;
the fervency with which I try to live them out has.*

*My husband is bemused by me,
but supportive and loving.*

I am occasionally asked by other Christians, “What happened during that hour?”...

*What happened during that hour
was the natural culmination
of my coming to faith:*

*I had been cracked open to the divine,
I read books that I would have laughed at before the cracking,
and the stars lined up and there was God,
and then I knew, and then I said it out loud to a third party,
and then I giggled.”^{vii}*

PAUSE

May God bring the light of his resurrection to us all this morning.
May God speak to our hearts.
And what our hearts already know,
may our minds begin to comprehend.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Luke 24:45

ⁱⁱ Luke 24:19-21 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 24:26 NIV

^{iv} Psalm 53:4-5 NIV

^v Psalm 22:16-18 NIV

^{vi} Senior, D. (2010). Exegetical Perspective on Luke 24:13–35. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 2, pp. 421–423). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

^{vii} Nicole Cliffe “How God Messed Up My Happy Atheist Life” May 20, 2016 Christianity Today
www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june/nicole-cliffe-how-god-messed-up-my-happy-atheist-life.html