

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 ~ Luke 24:13-35

Cut to the Heart

April 26, 2020 ~

3rd Sunday of Easter

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Introduction to Scripture

“Now on that same day.” That’s how our gospel lesson begins. Yes, that same day that began with the women discovering the empty tomb at dawn. If you are thinking, “Come on, wasn’t Easter three Sundays ago? You are right. So, I realize that hearing this story 15 days into the 50 days of Easter, may give you an eerie feeling that you are in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania where the movie, “Groundhog Day” takes place. You may remember Phil, the weatherman played by Bill Murray, kept waking up to relive the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over again. If you think about it, Easter is a much better day to keep redoing. That day started in pre-dawn dread and raw grief then turned into fearful shock and disbelief. Could it be? Slow hearts, burning hearts, aglow and aghast: Jesus is alive?!

Today’s Easter story is from Luke. There’s no Thomas missing the moment and Jesus coming back for Thomas a week later in Luke, that’s only in John’s Easter narrative, the story we looked at last week. Nor does Easter end on a mountaintop with Jesus delivering “the great commission” that Easter day is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. Today’s Easter story begins with two disciples who had lost all hope on a day that seemed like it would never end. And then it got even longer.

Sermon

“Here be dragons.” This is what used to be scrawled in pencil at the edge of medieval maps. The phrase was a kind of warning to any who might venture beyond the edge of the known and mapped territory of the world. In the land beyond the familiar, it was said, “O Traveler beware, here be dragons.” We may think, “how quaint!” Too bad they didn’t have GPS like we do that can take us anywhere on this globe, turn by turn. Yet even these clever devices cannot help us navigate another kind of unknown territory. Another kind of border where dragons “still be lurking.”

Where “be these dragons”? On our internal map, they lurk just on the edge of our “comfort zone.” You know, the zone we have all been forced out of by the incursion of the coronavirus pandemic. Our known world has shifted and we are all caught off balance in one way or another. In the US, over 52,000 souls have already died of COVID-19 and 26 million have filed for unemployment. 42 states have stay-at-home orders in place, drastically changing our daily routines. What is familiar or “normal” about our lives right now? Yes, friends, “Here be dragons:” monster strangeness ushered in by this microscopic and diabolically clever parasite.

What about the two in today’s story? Cleopas and his friend, heading as fast as they could away from Jerusalem, were heartsick. As disciples of Jesus, with Jesus now dead and his

body missing-- They too were on the edge of their known world. As they explained to this apparently clueless stranger “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” They were heart broken. The dragons of disappointment, grief, and loss weighed so heavy and clouded their minds so completely “they were kept from recognizing him.” Jesus had come to them on the edge of town, when they were on the edge of despair, but they could not yet see him for who he was.

I think we know about these dragons of disappointment, grief and loss, dashed hopes. Didn't we all hope for a quick recovery, an easy cure, a return to our familiar routines?

- But we had hoped that livestream worship could work for us
- But we had hoped that our high school musical would still happen this year
- But we had hoped my job would survive these layoffs
- But we had hoped to see our grandson graduate
- But we had hoped we could go back to school this year
- But we had hoped my new small business could survive this set back
- But we had hoped our trip this summer would still happen
- But we had hoped our dad would get better
- But we had hoped there would be a reliable and available test of COVID-19 by now...

These are just a few dragons of the dashed hopes that lurk just beyond the “dear ordinary” which took a train in March right out of town before we could say “goodbye.” Remember that soothing familiar, where we know what is going to happen next, where we hang out with our favorite people, work our jobs and then enjoy a ball game or a concert? Doesn't that seem like a long time ago already? As much as we love our familiar comfort zones, our Gospel issues a different sort of warning. From Jesus' birth in a barn to his last words on the cross, we see and hear the very opposite message. Just beyond our comfort zone is where we find an invitation for our hearts: “Here be grace.” “Here be hope,” “Here be salvation.”

This story is penciled on the edge of Luke's gospel story surrounded in mystery: the people and the destination are quite unknown. Nowhere else is Cleopas mentioned in the Bible. Cleopas and his unnamed companion (it could have been a woman) are walking to a place called “Emmaus.” No biblical scholar has ever been able to really locate it on a map. And what happens? Jesus appears out of nowhere to the two distraught people as a stranger. He remains a stranger to them, even with all the talking and all the walking, even with his two opening questions, his mildly hectoring response, (You fools! How can you be so “slow of heart”) and then his slow, patient, review session reminding them of their own faith story: Moses and the prophets, and how Jesus' had indeed fulfilled the promise of God. Perhaps not their original hope for a Messiah.

The story turns for these two distraught people on one thing. It turns on their decision to invite the stranger in. “Stay with us because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” One small gesture of hospitality. That's all it took. Contrary to middle eastern hospitality custom, which would usually involve a couple of rounds of invitation and refusal, before accepting, Jesus accepted their urgent invitation on their first “Stay with us.”

Little did they know what would happen next. All of a sudden, around the table, as they were sharing bread with this stranger, everything changed. The cloud of grief lifted. Here was Christ in their very midst. Out of death, life. Out of despair hope. Everything looked different in the light of Christ's presence. They wolfed down their dinner and high-tailed it all the way, 7.5 miles back to Jerusalem. And the story still isn't over. The day that never ends.

This story gives me hope. Jesus was and is the one to redeem us all. But Christ waits for our invitation. Jesus beckons us to inch off the map toward the dragons. We've seen Jesus do this during his life on earth: Picture Zacchaeus climbing the tree; or the woman with the issue of blood inching through the crowd just to touch the hem of his garment; or the 4 friends, lowering their paralytic friend through the roof to Jesus. Each of them took a few steps off their map, where there be dragons, but there also be grace.

Christ knows our hearts. Christ knows what makes them pound at night when we are alone and scared. And still he knows the heart of us, the best, the center of us. How do we access that part? The turn happened when they made room for the stranger. Any table can become the place where the Risen Christ appears. Any meal can become a sacred sharing of souls intermingled with bread. A meal that restores hope and strength when we befriend the stranger. Here be dragons. But here also be grace.

I hear this story pushing us to confront our fears and to slay this dragon. Not later, not whenever we determine the threat of the Pandemic is past. No one knows when or how that will be. This dragon is one we are all facing. The stranger comes to us in many forms: The stranger inside of us—the part of us we don't like or understand. Jesus does! The stranger in our midst—estranged family or friends we don't understand or feel alienated from. Jesus does. The stranger who is the conflict crying out for healing and forgiveness, maybe the same argument or conflict that flares up again and again. Jesus forgives, again and again. Or the stranger we disagree with—whose way of life, whose race, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, political party, religion, or atheism seem strange to us. Invite them to your table. Jesus does. The stranger who is in need—whether in need of food, shelter, health care, education, a job, a sense of place and worth. Help as you can. Jesus told us to.

Where be, who be, *your* dragons? Where be our dragons, here at FPC? Christ calls us to make room—even if it is just one inch at a time. That's usually the way it happens. We are given a tiny opening, a word, a look, a chance to choose grace. A chance to be quick of heart instead of "slow of heart." What stranger might Jesus be urging you to make room for? Whether our hearts are slow and dull, or our hearts are burning and churning, Jesus keeps calling us to venture beyond. Jesus keeps calling us "to go beyond the mind we have" which is Marcus Borg's explanation of the word "Repent." In our first lesson, this is what Peter preached to the crowd in Jerusalem, when they were "cut to the heart" by the story of Jesus and asked Peter, "What should we do? Repent. Go beyond the mind that you have. Go beyond the mental map you are operating within.

Did you know that when a barn is on fire, and sheep or horses are evacuated, the door has got to be shut behind them? If the barn door is left open, all the animals could be lost. In the confusion and chaos of a fire, sheep and horses have been known to run back into the burning barn, rather than to continue forward beyond the edge of their internal map. Sheep will choose the destructive familiar over unknown zone of rescue. Doesn't that sound a little like you and me?

Jesus meets us on the road—wherever we are. Waiting for us to invite the stranger in. When we do, it becomes resurrection day, again and again.