

Call to Worship

Come, let us touch the life of Christ. **Let us lay down our struggles for faith at the feet of the One who is as near as touching.**

For this is Christ who comes with gifts of hope gathering in the realities of our doubts and confusions and holding them tenderly in understanding. **Grant us your peace, gracious Lord. We believe, help us in our unbelief.**

Prayer of Invocation

O God, we imagine ourselves with the friends of Christ so long ago. We join them in their vulnerability and we open our lives to the gifts that you offer in your presence with us. Come, loving Jesus, come, Send us your Holy Spirit this day. Amen.

The Word

Luke 24:36-48

Jesus appears to the disciples: While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" **They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.**

He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have." **As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet.**

Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?" **They gave him a piece of baked fish. Taking it, he ate it in front of them.**

Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." **Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.**

He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Living the Word

The reaction of the disciples to this appearance of Jesus after his death was one of disbelief and fear. According to what we find in this passage of Luke, Jesus has two reasons for his visit: to be present in a way that they cannot deny his presence and to once again commission them for the work ahead – the preaching of the gospels, good news God had for them and for us.

Once again Easter week is summed up, but then a new element is added at the end: looking forward into the potential of the future through the coming of the Holy Spirit and the opening of God's goodness for everyone. The resurrection of Christ's body becomes a symbol for us of the new life we have through an ever present Lord. Let's begin with some review: Jesus, friend teacher and Savior died on the cross in a few days time was resurrected from the dead, as he said he would be. According to Luke's gospel, Mary and the women saw two men (also referred to as angels) at the tomb. In Luke, Mary doesn't see Jesus or she doesn't recognize him in

one of the men she sees. In the gospel of John, she later recognizes one of the two 'men in dazzling white' as Jesus, resurrected.

The women run to tell the disciples who come back to the tomb to see for themselves. In Luke it says that Peter saw the empty linens and wondered what had happened. Remember that even though Jesus had spoken of coming back, mentioning the three days, he did not share with them how or what it might look like. For the disciples their only example to draw from was Jesus' raising of Lazarus after his death. Lazarus came out of the grave still wrapped in the grave lines he was buried with. This time was different.

Many people after losing a loved one especially if it is a sudden death, go through a grief stage of denial, when they pray and plead with God for it not to be true. If God, by God's will, brought back someone who had been clinically dead for three days it would be a miracle, but also beyond the realm of our understanding and we would surely be frightened. For all of the movies and TV shows where people come back to life, in reality, it doesn't happen often.

Two of Jesus' followers were going home after the death, sad and disappointed how it had all turned out. They were joined by another traveler, who asked why they were so sad. They shared what they knew of the death of their friend and leader. He in turn reviewed for them all that had happened in Jesus' ministry up to the death. They invited him to stop for meal and as this guest broke the loaf of bread they recognized him as Christ, and he disappeared before them. They hadn't recognized him in their sorrow and loss, but he had been with them all along. Of course, they ran all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that he was back. As they shared their story with the other disciples, it was shared back to them "The Lord really has risen, He appeared to Simon!"

Jesus was 'the topic of the day' all throughout Jerusalem. Everyone wondered what to think of the disaster of Friday and the mystery of Sunday. And now, word was that Jesus was still alive! The disciples and people all over Jerusalem were trying to figure out what was truth and what was just, stories. Really what had happened, who should they believe, who were credible witnesses, and what would happen next? All of the Christ followers, including the disciples were wrapped up in chaos and confusion – fear, frustration, guilt, grief, doubt, anxiety, suspicion, distrust, restlessness, despondency, and terror. Have you heard any of that in the news this week? Their friend, teacher and Savior was dead and his body was missing. Behind locked doors, the disciples huddled together in fear that they would be taken by the authorities next.

Then in the center of their rising anxiety, from nowhere, Jesus appears! In the midst of their wrestling thoughts, Jesus brings them a greeting of peace. Doesn't it amaze us that Jesus could bring such a healing word into the middle of the craziest situations? Do you think they all felt that peace and instantly calmed? How about you in the last two months, to whom are you looking for your peace and calm?

Have you been looking toward Christ for your calm and peace? Are you finding it anywhere? Probably not; it is our human side to not let go of trauma and drama until we know there is no longer reason to fear. Trusting in the midst of still 'unknowns' is difficult for us. Even so, the word of peace helps them to know that Jesus understands what they are experiencing and it also challenges their fear. Jesus says, "*Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts?*" He knows where the disciples are at and he meets them there.

While he was there he 'opened their minds to understanding the scriptures.' That was what he had done in his whole message and teaching for the three years of his ministry. He took the prophecies of the Old Testament

and helped them understand that those prophecies from centuries before were being fulfilled through his life, death and resurrection.

So here he is reminding them again, not dwelling on the death and resurrection, except to point out that they had been foretold long before they happened. He helped them understand that this was all part of God's plan, not a mistake by Pilate or the Chief Jewish Priests. This passage of scripture ends with Christ commissioning them to go out and preach of a change of heart to all people; a life of forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all, and the promise of the help of a heavenly power to help them be God's people.

Joy comes as they let go of their fear, but they still aren't sure how to believe all of this and not able to let go of their questions. Can we relate? Our hearts might thrill to see Jesus alive, but it is too much for us to wrap our minds around that he could come back and stand in front of us. Many have trouble believing that Jesus could be a serious presence with us every moment as we work to live in his presence.

Five years ago, after seeing the Bishop Jung bobble head, some of my parishioners were apprehensive about the next Sunday morning when he would be visiting their church in New Richmond. Here is what I told them: If you want to be in the presence of someone who is passionate about Christ; who wants to build up the Kingdom of God in the midst of declining churches; who has faith in the power of God; one who will give of himself whatever it takes to serve others, then you want to be here next week.

People chosen to lead as Bishop are the ones that through their careers have shown their strength of relationship with God through their living compassionately like Christ. It isn't a job where you can 'brown nose, pay off or bluff your way to the top. To be a Bishop in the United Methodist Church is to put everyone else before yourself, a servant of Christ. Bishop Jung is a very humble person and wants to experience what is happening in the churches. There is no need to put on airs for him, just for us to be who we are. He is excited about the potential of new ministry in and comes as an encourager. My experience with him has been one of fear and questioning as he has challenged us to look beyond who we are now. Yet every time I hear him speak, I leave feeling that I have been in the presence of an emissary of God's greatness.

When I ran across these words from five years ago, I realized that they apply as much now, here, as then did then in New Richmond. Bishop Jung was the one who invited us into the MCCI program that has made us stronger in our leadership and finances in this church. He is a visionary and has lead the United Methodists through rough waters, tackling issues that had been simmering and festering for decades.

It is much easier for us to have everything defined and in order in our lives. We like to know that the things that are 'normal' will always stay that way, even pushing away the things we don't want to address.. But there are times for new norms for new generations. Jesus was fulfilling a shift in religion that had been coming for centuries. We see today a shrinking church in all denominations and it is time to test some new norms or fade away into the sunset.

Will someone soon say, "there used to be a United Methodist Church in Hayward, but it died off a little at a time?" Or might they say "the United Methodist Church in Hayward continues to move forward to serve the community as well as itself. It has continued to reach out in order to do Christian Ministry as a vital congregation of a new sort?" Only time will tell...

Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to begin to see that death isn't the final word. Freed from those bonds, they are sent out to be witnesses of the gospel story, far beyond where they thought they could go. Nancy

Blakely, a hospice chaplain in Pelzer, South Carolina writes this: "Our fear may be very personal, such as the fear of hearing the dreaded words 'cancer or Covid-19.'

Other fears are unemployment, loneliness, and loss. Often these fears get played out on a national level. We fear terrorist attacks. Underlying our fears is the one that we can't seem to talk about easily – the fear of death, our own or that of someone we love. Our fears hold us captive. It becomes difficult to give witness to the great joy that is ours – that the bonds of death could not hold Jesus. Jesus is alive."

Jesus was there, with simple, comforting words, both as reassurance and some reprimand. "*Peace be with you*" was followed by "*why are you startled and why are doubts arising in your heart?*" Then, as the book of Luke records in other times when they had been together, he asks "*Do you have anything to eat?*" It was the same Jesus they had known before, yet different – once dead but now alive, caring yet still fussing. Jesus acted as if nothing had happened – he seemed normal and natural, just what they expected from him.

He had not seemed his same old self as they had nailed him to the cross. He even cried out that he felt God had forsaken him. Barbara Essex, Director of Pastoral Services at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California puts it this way, "Earthly human power had triumphed over him. From the high priests, the scribes and elders; the skeptics – they had all condemned him as a scoundrel and blasphemer – guilty as charged!

The governor, Roman soldiers, bystanders and criminals condemned him as a traitor and a rebel – guilty as charged! Even God seemed to abandon him – no last-minute rescuing angels, no surprise witness to change the verdict – guilty as charged! According to the law of that day Jesus got what he deserved. This should be the end of the story.

But we are surprised – God and Jesus are in cahoots against the powers of the world. By raising Jesus from the dead, God declared to the religious and political leaders, 'This is not about you!' While they thought they had the upper hand and exercised all power that mattered, God declared that God has been working behind the scenes the whole time."

Resurrection power is the power to plant the seeds of transformation. Those first Christ followers give us their experiences and that can give us the hope to go out and do the same. Closed Minds can be opened. The way it is to be done is within peace not war. Jesus was a strategic leader, but without the physical battles with people. It is as if he said "Let them have their way – God will use it to win. They may win the battles, but they will lose the war."

The disciples behind closed doors may have felt safe, yet the doors were no hindrances to the risen Christ. Like the disciples, we are released from fear because we have Christ on our side. That is such good news we should want to witness it to everyone around us. Jesus appeared in the midst of his early followers. He brought change to their lives as they moved from fright and alarm, to joy mixed with disbelief and puzzlement to open and understanding minds and hearts.

The defense is sure – Christ is risen! The work begins and continues because of the resurrection. Like the disciples we are called to go out and live the good news, speak the good news. I invite you to pray, in Jesus' name, for open minds, a change of heart, a life of forgiveness, and to be ready to receive the Holy Spirit when it comes with new ideas for you.