

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Rev. Julia A. Carlson

“This is a Time for Openness”

April 26, 2020

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, Luke 24:13-35

Third Sunday of Easter

What if you could just walk away?

Back in 2016, The New Yorker published a lengthy article about the venture capitalists and dot-com-ers who have purchased condominiums that have been built in old missile silos. The idea is they have a place to shelter in case of a nuclear event – I had been wondering, in these days of COVID-19, if any of these condos have been put to use. Bloomberg just reported that they have. The company that developed the missile silo condos said they’ve had calls from tenants who decided to go underground to hunker down, but had forgotten their security codes and entry procedures.

When the world suddenly turns on its head – the world we’ve created for ourselves and for our families, and the world created around us by history, systems, governments, and corporations, when all of that turns upside down, there is a deep human impulse to go home, to find a safe place. The recent Bloomberg article profiled a young Silicon Valley executive who was on one of the last flights to New Zealand – another popular haven for the nuclear survival planners. They expect it to be a low level target and off the beaten path for any radiation clouds. What they didn't expect was for the border to close.

For myself, this idea of sheltering in place was a welcome policy. With pictures of Italy fresh in my mind and, back then, the growing concern for New York, walking away sounded just fine. Which, again, is just where we find Jesus today – on the road. Back in 2016, The New Yorker published a lengthy article about the venture capitalists and dot-com-ers who have purchased condominiums that have been built in old missile silos. The idea is they have a place to shelter in case of a nuclear event – I had been wondering, in these days of COVID-19, if any of these condos have been put to use. Bloomberg just reported that they have. The company that developed the missile silo condos said they’ve had calls from tenants who decided to go underground to hunker down, but had forgotten their security codes and entry procedures.

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I don't know if I or we can adequately describe the feelings of Jesus' disciples after the trial and crucifixion. Certainly, much has been written about it – many people, including you and I have tried to understand and describe it. But we've been raised in a world where the religion that bears Jesus' name has more than two thousand years of influence and presence; and a well known outcome. How can we even begin to imagine how it felt to see him arrested? Or to fearfully watch from a distance as a dear and holy friend died from torture. How did it feel when all of their hopes died?

Until now, perhaps now we can really begin to know. During this time of virus, a pastor in Great Britain wrote a new version of our scripture:

Two family members from the same household walked a necessary journey to spend lock-down together. As they walked a stranger drew near, too near, and walked beside them. They eyed him with suspicion and asked him to stay 2 metres apart. As he took up a socially distant position he asked them what was troubling them? Why the face mask and gloves?

Incredulously, they told him about the virus about the carnage it was wreaking and the isolation measures being imposed. How could he not have heard?

He told them about the homeless woman he'd just met who, for the first time, was being given a place to shelter, who didn't know the rules of social engagement or of distancing and who could not settle into a new reality for fear of what awaited her at the other end when, inevitably she'd be back on the street.

He told them of the young nurse who, every day, dropped off his children at school while most of their friends were home, so that he could go and hold the hands and adjust the masks of those who were fighting for life – and of his terror that he would bring the virus home.

He told them of the young man whose wife had just given birth to their first child who could not bring the child to be held by his parents or octogenarian grandparents, who was learning the skills of parenting through WhatsApp and FaceTime.

He told them of young people unable to undertake the rites of passage that mark their movement through all the phases and seasons of life.

He told them of folk of all ages at risk, isolating alone relying on strangers and neighbours for support.

He told them of the pain of families whose loved ones had died without family by their side unable to perform the rituals of grief and mourning.

He told them story after story not to diminish their own fear and loss but to enable them in the midst of it all to sense community to honour sacrifice to catch a glimmer of hope and to know that all that they were being asked to endure could not last forever.

That all that they learned and the beauty that they witnessed in the present and in the emerging would not be lost when the virus was conquered.

And the world would be changed forever as care and compassion and love and connection became gifts that were celebrated beyond price.

And, when he disappeared from their sight they found that he had left on the doorstep for them bread and wine. Whether virtual or real, or physical or spiritual, Christ was present in the sacrament they shared and in the hope and promise they clung to for the future. Amen.

Right here, right now, God is telling God's story of salvation along this road we are traveling. Jesus, The Christ is walking with us along every road we travel. The Spirit is like a live wire connecting us to it all. No matter what befalls this Earth and her inhabitants, we have holy companions. God understands our impulse to run and comes alongside. God stays with us asking us if now is a good time for a conversation. I admit, too often I just keep going without even looking to see if Jesus is there much less allowing him to ask me why I'm feeling so overwhelmed.

The conversation travels through that live wire. It comes through our daily readings and practices. I know many of you are reading Richard Rohr daily; you are hearing God's story retold through Rohr's own spiritual journey as well as through Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, and through many modern voices up to and including philosopher Ken Wilbur. Listen carefully and find ways to respond as a partner in this conversation.

If you are reading John O'Donohue, you are reading God's story through faithful Catholic catechism and Irish folklore which is deep earth-based sacred story and ecological truth. And all of it coupled with philosophers Hegel and Kant, and poets Pessoa, Neruda, and others including O'Donohue himself. What is the Spirit telling you?

I know some of you are reading Barbara Brown Taylor, Anne Lamott or Rachel Held Evans; you're reading John Haught and David Brooks – if you are reading Ram Dass, Hafiz, or Rumi, if you are reading David Whyte or Mary Oliver; Brene Brown or Eckhart Tolle – you are hearing poetry and stories of healing, and faith. You are hearing provocative meter and the kinds of questions that help us break out of the small lairs and dens we have built for ourselves to stay safe. We built these self-shelters long before the virus came - and they are falling apart. That is an invitation to greater openness and conversation with God. Even as we continue to shelter in place, because that is the right thing to do, all of what is happening is an invitation to openness. We are invited to an openness that allows us to see and lean into what God is doing and making; from the beginning, God has created new life out of chaos.

Fight, flight, and freeze narrow our brain capacity and puts us in a survival mode. When we are fearful, we operate on auto-pilot. Bloomberg had a picture of the Silicon Valley denizens in exile driving a boat off the coast of New Zealand. He says that rents there are cheaper than San Francisco and that he's trying to find investors for a start-up company that is making an N95 type mask. Just business as usual in another locale. It seems to beat sheltering at home in St. Paul, MN. But then I ran into T. S. Eliot who says: "You will have to live with those memories and make them into something new. Only by acceptance of the past will you alter its meaning" (From the Cocktail Party). Even if it's off the coast of New Zealand, whatever we do in fight, flight, or freeze mode will always be remembered as fear. But if we can rest in our reality, we give God space to save. God is always coming alongside us - waiting to retell God's own story of justice, courage, reconciliation, and hope.

Jesus died because the structures and leaders of his day could not envision any other way of being. In lamentation, Cleopas and his companion go into flight mode – replaying the good and glorious moments of Jesus' life and then the trauma of his death over and over again. Emmanuel, God With Us, breaks into these unhealthy, deadening patterns.

Seminary president and theologian Serene Jones says, "... faith is a state of trust, a form of embodied knowledge in which one knows that one's life is held, fully and completely, in the reality of God's grace. ... to have faith is to find oneself utterly and completely determined by this story; it involves letting the weight of one's life fall into the hands of saving grace. It is to be determined by the compelling beauty of this reality" ("Bounded-Openness" by Serene Jones, *Interpretation*, 57).

We all have the freedom to make God, in all God's grace and beauty, our first and most compelling reality. What happened in today's scripture is a dialogue between fear and love – it is the love of God seeking us in every circumstance. As comforting as it is, it is not only an assurance that God is with us. It is also the invitation to let go our defenses – to break our cycles of reactivity – and to be receptive to gathering and sifting the meaning of what is happening around us. It is an invitation to choose justice, courage, reconciliation, and hope. On the road to Emmaus, the narration of God's story, the narrator himself, and the moment of revelation all speak to an opportunity that is present in every catastrophe: the coming of God's kingdom. This is a time to be open for the salvation God brings – listen for it – watch for it – let go of your own narrative and lean into God's hope for a new creation. Amen.