

Hearts on Fire

Sunday, April 26th, 2020 || Third Sunday of Easter

A Special Message from our District Superintendent, Rev. Megan Stowe

We invite you to light a candle at 9 AM and join us in prayer

Audio worship, including music, is available at <https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>

This week's sermon is also available in video format on our Facebook Page

Scripture Reading

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day [Easter morning], two of them [disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he [Jesus] said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening up the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon, from our District Superintendent, Rev. Megan Stowe

This Gospel text is one of people's favorite scriptures, so I was more than a little excited when I was in the Holy Land with Bishop Devadhar to visit Emmaus-Nicopolis. We had started the Spiritual Pilgrimage in Bethlehem, moved to the Sea of Galilee and were finishing up in Jerusalem but had a side trip planned to this community right outside of Jerusalem. There are two incredibly moving parts of this excursion: a first century Jewish tomb so you can get a sense of what the tomb that Jesus might have been laid in and a sense of what the women were experiencing on that first Easter morning. There is also a cheesy face-in-the-hole board where you could take a picture to remember the site. You know those boards that you see at apple orchards and county fairs, where you stand behind the board and stick your head through? Well, the church at Emmaus is owned by the Russian Orthodox Church and so fittingly, there is what appears to be a full-sized icon of Jesus and two companions. One of the companions conveniently is missing their face so you can stick your head through and literally become one of Jesus' disciples. At first, I discounted this board as a touristy thing, but with some convincing from my fellow pilgrims, I stuck my head in and those pictures are some of my favorites of the Holy

Land trip. I don't know about you, but I have occasionally missed opportunities to fully engage with Jesus, maybe entertained angels unaware... These images bring me to a deeper understanding of the scriptures.

We find ourselves still in Eastertide and today's text takes place on Easter afternoon and evening. Two of Jesus' followers are leaving Jerusalem dejected. They had gone to Jerusalem with such high hopes. Maybe this would be the time that the government would be overthrown. Maybe this celebration of Passover would connect God's children in new and wonderful ways. The itinerant rabbi that they had followed for the past few months or years was gone. The man they thought was the messiah had been crucified when the Roman political leaders worked hand in hand with Jewish religious leaders. These two turn to the west, towards their home in Emmaus, just a seven-mile journey outside of Jerusalem. They found that they were joined on the road by someone they didn't know. I wonder if it was because the sun is starting to set, or the sun was in their eyes? Maybe the stranger is just a half-step behind their pace so they can't see him clearly without stopping to stare? Maybe their grief clouded their vision? Verse 16 states, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Whatever the reason, they do not know that they are in the presence of the risen Christ.

I wonder what it is about Jesus post-resurrection that makes people unable to recognize him until he does familiar things like call them by name; show them his wounds; or taking, blessing and breaking bread? Mary Magdalene thought that Jesus on Easter morning was the gardener. Was it her deep grief that kept her from recognizing him? Last Sunday we heard that the disciples did not recognize Jesus until they saw his wounds on his hands, feet and side. Was it due to their extreme fear that they too would be crucified? Was that why they stayed huddled in fear behind locked doors despite hearing that Mary had seen the risen savior? Were Cleopas and the unnamed companion so stuck in Good Friday's depression and grief or Holy Saturday's waiting and hopelessness that they were not able to comprehend the Good News on that Easter Sunday?

This stranger notices that Cleopas and his unnamed friend are consumed with sadness. He starts conversation with them and seems completely unaware of what had taken place in Jerusalem the past few days. They begin sharing about Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem just a week ago, upsetting the religious and political leaders alike. People shouted "Hosanna, God save us." Crowds waved palm branches, a symbol of the Maccabean revolt against Rome. People laid down their cloaks in the road for him, signaling that Jesus is King. The two declare him a prophet mighty in deed and word. They had hoped that he would redeem Israel. Then all of a sudden, he was betrayed by one of his inner circle, arrested, tried, beaten and then crucified. Even this morning, some of the women came proclaiming that Jesus was no longer in the tomb but had been resurrected. What sort of nonsense was that? Of course these two are overwhelmed by the depth of their emotions.

Did you hear what the two said, "We had hoped..." I think that today, I am understanding this part of the scripture more acutely than ever before. I had hoped to be able to attend worship in person with you, not to record a sermon to be played over the internet. We had hoped that that children would go to school rather than being sequestered at home. We had hoped that this virus would somehow miss our country. We had hoped that our loved ones were healthy. We had hoped we were able to keep our jobs. We had hoped that our children would be able to participate in prom, to get ready to walk across the stage and receive their diplomas. We had hoped to go somewhere exciting for Spring Break or to spend time with family and friends. We had hoped that we could gather together on Easter, with all the flowers on the altar and all the special music. We had hoped to celebrate communion with our fellow parishioners. We had hoped many things, all of which have been put on the back burner. We understand the sadness and grief of the two disciples. We are living that reality as well.

This stranger responds to their news of the past week strangely. He says to them, "Oh how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' in verses 23 – 26. Can you imagine how these two must have felt to have the Torah explained to them? To be given guidance? To be offered hope?

As the three approached the village of Emmaus, Cleopas notices that their companion is about to continue on his way, so they invited him to join them at their house for the evening meal. Jewish tradition encourages people to be hospitable, to invite them to sit and eat together. They offer him the radical hospitality that their

rabbi Jesus had preached so much about. They became like Jesus when they invited the guest in. So this companion took the leftover matzah bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. The guest has become the host. In the giving of that bread that their eyes are finally opened, and they recognize that they had walked the entire way from Jerusalem with Jesus. How often have we missed a crucial detail? How often have we not recognized Jesus in our midst?

As they recognize that they have been travelling with Jesus, he disappears. Cleopas and his companion rush back to Jerusalem, to update the disciples. They claimed that “our hearts burned within us.” No, Cleopas did not need some heartburn medicine but something changed within him as Jesus explains the Holy Scriptures. Something changes within us as well, as we choose to follow Jesus, to be a disciple, to be a companion on the journey. The word companion translates from Latin to someone you break bread with. When we break bread with Jesus, when we follow him, when our lives are transformed because of his teachings, healings, miracles and sign acts, then we are compelled to share this good news with any that we encounter.

As United Methodists, we frequently hear the story of when one of the founders of our denomination, John Wesley, had an Emmaus experience. As he heard a Bible Study leader read from the “Introduction to the Letter to the Romans” by Martin Luther, Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. After a lifetime of being a Pastor’s kid, going to university to be an Anglican Priest, travelling to the American Colonies to convert the Native Americans, and returning to London as a broken man, John Wesley finally felt that his sins had been forgiven, that Jesus had died for him. He received the assurance of his salvation after years of doubt. After receiving this assurance, he didn’t keep it to himself. Instead, he started preaching everywhere he could so that others’ eyes might be opened to recognize the risen Christ.

Cleopas and his unnamed companion had been hoping that one thing would happen that week in Jerusalem, yet the opposite had occurred. But as Jesus walked alongside them. They were able to let go of all the baggage of the previous week, the grief, the pain that they had been carrying around. Their hearts burned as he spoke to them. I often wonder if Cleopas’ friend is not named so that you and I can be transported into this text more easily. Like the icon at Emmaus-Nicopolis, you or I could be the unnamed disciple.

In the midst of our grief and pain, Jesus is walking down this road with us. We must let go of the grief of what was so we can see the possibility of a new future with hope and with hearts on fire. Even when we feel the most burdened by grief, by injustice, by pain, this is precisely when Jesus is our companion, walking alongside us, offering us comfort, and giving us strength for the journey ahead. We receive this strength through worship. I look forward to the day when we can celebrate communion together, as we take, bless, break and give bread, we’ll be made whole once again. May we realize today that our hearts are on fire, as we recognize that Jesus has been journeying alongside of us. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: Phyllis who has returned home after being hospitalized for pneumonia; God’s hand in medical advancements; doctors, nurses, medical professionals, nursing home caregivers, police, firefighters, EMTs, and all essential workers who still must report to work and cannot stay home. Holding in our hearts: all those affected by the Coronavirus and the health of our world, all those who have lost income due to the virus, Al who is at Harrington Hospital, Barry, the family of Bernice, Betty, Carrie G. who is working in close contact with those who have Covid, Dell, Evelyn, the family of Judy Bartlett in her loss, Melissa for her shoulder injury recovery, our prayer shawl recipients, Priscilla, Rachel who is a nurse at Tufts, the Reim family, the United Methodist Church, all those who struggle with addiction, all those who are in the path of dangerous weather. Note that this list will renew each month.

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.¹

¹ Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

Community Announcements

- **Thank you Rev. Megan Stowe!** We are so appreciative of Rev. Megan Stowe and her leadership during this difficult season. We are thankful for her message, which is being shared in several churches this Sunday. For a video version of the message, please visit our Facebook page.
- **May Meetings.** SPRC will be meeting by phone conference on Wednesday, May 6th at 7 PM. Pastor Christy will start the call chain for the SPRC meeting. Ad Council will be meeting by phone conference on Wednesday, May 13th at 10:07 AM. For Ad Council, please call (978) 990-5000 and enter access code 719365 to enter the meeting room.
- **Audio Worship.** Go to <https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services> to stream our services, which include musical selections from our new Music Director, Melissa, message from Pastor Christy (Rev. Megan Stowe, our District Superintendent, this week), a hymn, prayer, and a postlude. If you are unable to access the internet, let Pastor Christy know, and she can mail you a CD of our services.
- **Recipe Collection.** In classic Methodist fashion, we all know that food brings us together. Pastor Christy is putting together a cookbook of our church's favorite recipes to share with everyone during this time of being apart. Please email, snail mail, or call Christy to tell her your favorite recipe(s) by Friday, May 1st. Feel free to share a story and/or photos surrounding the recipe too!
- **Prayer Chain.** If you are interested in staying in touch with folks and being a part of our Prayer Chain, let Pastor Christy know. If you have a request you'd like to send through, call Christy or Jane to initiate the chain.
- **Church Directory.** If you would like an updated Church Directory, please let Pastor Christy know, and she will send one in the next mailing.
- **Thank you!!** to Paul Ayers for his many years of service to our church as our treasurer! He has done incredible work for our church. Paul will be stepping back from his responsibilities in June, and we are now looking for a new treasurer. Let us be in prayer and discernment as we seek a new treasurer, and please contact Pastor Christy if you are interested in serving. A Finance Committee Meeting will take place in May to discuss responsibilities and a transition plan.
- **Offerings** are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585
- **Heifer Project - Please Send in Your Gifts.** Our Mission Project for Lent is supporting Heifer Project International, an organization that raises funds for economic development for folks in need across the world through environmental sustainability and other methods. Checks can be made out to George Whitefield UMC with the memo line "Heifer Project." See Pastor Christy if you have any questions. Thank you for supporting this mission effort during Lent! *Please send your final checks to the church, and we will decide on which animal we'd like to purchase.*
- **The Sharing Cupboard** is experiencing high volumes of need at this time. If you are able to donate jelly, jam, coffee, canned protein products such as tuna, chicken, and beans, or household products such as hand sanitizer, disinfecting cleaning wipes or spray, bar soap, toilet paper, paper towels, or laundry detergent, it would be greatly appreciated.
- **Future Services.** We are disappointed to say that all church services will continue to be suspended until further notice at Gov. Baker's orders, which means we will not be able to meet together for the foreseeable future. For the latest updates on our response to COVID-19, be sure to check out our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com or Like us on Facebook. You can also call the church number at (508) 867-3667 for more information.

A Companion Guide
The Upper Room Daily Devotionals
Monday, April 27th through Saturday, May 2nd
Written by Pastor Christy Wright

*We invite you to light a candle at 9 AM daily and join us in prayer and devotion.
 If you do not have a copy of the May/June edition of The Upper Room Daily Devotionals,
 let Pastor Christy know & she will send you one.*

Monday, April 27th, 2020

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-8

“Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”

These days, we are hearing a lot of talking heads on the news, online, and even among our family and friends who are sharing information containing varying degrees of truth. It can be difficult to tell who is being honest and who is being manipulative. But in this passage, we are called to hold fast to the Truth and Light of Jesus Christ, through whom we receive the strength to persist toward eternal life, even when circumstances are difficult and when the world seems to be working against us. May we work toward persistence together, even when we are apart. May we seek God’s call to be bearers of good news, of true news, even in light of our current situation. And may we remember that Jesus is the Truth and Light of all of creation.

Let Us Pray Together

God of Truth, Your Light shines on all that is true and hopeful, on all that facilitates growth and nourishment. You provide us with ways to test the waters. Guide us, we pray, as we wade through the news these days. Show us the truth that You would have us hear, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, April 28th, 2020

Read Psalm 118:5-9

“Out of my distress, I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.”

As we continue in deep prayer for our world, it is only natural to feel weary and tired, even exhausted. No one knew life would get this difficult. But when we call on God, when we meditate each morning on God’s Word and join together in prayer, we have an opportunity to experience a certain spaciousness with God. Perhaps it feels like breathing room, enough for us to start making sense of the world again. The above passage of God answering us and setting us “in a broad place” has been translated in many ways, including *ample space, wide open place*, and even, *the Lord answered me and set me free, and took my worries away*. May we experience this breathing room as we breathe in God’s blessings anew each morning.

Let Us Pray Together

God of spacious fields and wide-open places, You meet with us in our distress to give us hope and new life. When all feels constricted and anxiety-ridden, You provide us with breathing room. Teach us to breathe in deeply Your blessings of hope and love, and exhale our worries and cares to You, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, April 29th, 2020

Read Matthew 20:29-34

“Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.”

One of the most heartwarming trends that has overtaken our world is the beautiful generosity of those who are able to give. Many have been moved by compassion to donate to food pantries, to provide free meals for those who still have to work, to support local businesses, and to give thanks to our emergency responders. Recall the many ways that Jesus responded to the needs of all he encountered: he gave sight to the blind, bread to the hungry, and healed the sick. Jesus was moved with compassion in every step he took, and his example of loving God and loving one another is one that we, too, can model for the sake of the world. For us, it can be something as simple as sending a card to a friend or picking up the phone. How are you moved with compassion today?

Let Us Pray Together

God of compassion, Your great love opens our eyes to the blessings you have for us as well as the ways we can bless others through You. Your grace toward all provides us with an example of how we are to love one another. Teach us to spread Your love, that it might overcome all adversity, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, April 30th, 2020**Read Micah 6:6-8****“Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”**

In this time of doing church from a distance, it can be easy to feel like we're not doing enough to worship God. We have no altar, and we don't decorate the sanctuary with flowers. We don't meet for coffee, and we no longer meet in the church building. But we can meet together in prayer daily and in meditation of the scriptures. And we can meet over the phone to pray together. It doesn't have to be complicated or overly orchestrated. The good news is that God doesn't expect extravagant offerings or pomp and circumstance in order for the Holy Spirit to be present with us. God meets with us in the quiet of our bedrooms at night and at the table as we drink our morning coffee. All of life can be worship. So what does the Lord require of us? Simply, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

Let Us Pray Together

God of simplicity, we are thankful that we are able to meet You in the quietness of our own homes. We are grateful for our church family, whom we can call on to pray for us and for others. Teach us to let go of expectations of what worship should look like, and instead meet with You in the peaceful stillness, through Christ. Amen.

Friday, May 1st, 2020**Read Romans 8:12-17****“For you did not receive a spirit ... of fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”**

Many of you know that I officiated my brother's wedding in October. As my brother and I stood up front to wait for his bride to walk down the aisle, both of us were feeling pretty nervous. But as she approached us, we knew that we were family. There were tears shed and lots of laughter, but we made it through the ceremony in grace and love. It was a wedding marked by joy rather than nervousness, with a merging of families, and a gathering of loved ones in which all belong. When God calls us into community, it is a blessing of adoption, a feeling of so much love that our hearts could burst. We were not given a spirit of fear, nervousness, or meekness, but rather a spirit of invitation for all to join the family, where all have a place at the table.

Let Us Pray Together

God of relationality, You provide us with the community we so desperately seek. You bless us with family and friends whose deep care for us extends into joy and compassion. Teach us to extend our hand to all those who need Your love this day and forever more, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, May 2nd, 2020**Read Luke 15:11-32****“His father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him.”**

One of my friends is releasing her first book in September. It's called *Brave Talk*, and it's all about reconciliation within a community. She suggests that communities need to talk openly about any conflict they may be experiencing, but she offers an interesting and unique perspective: sometimes conflict cannot be resolved. Sometimes reconciliation looks more like appreciation for one another's differences, and then moving on. But in this morning's scripture, we hear of conflict within a family that *does* lead to fuller reconciliation - because God is the father in this illustration. When we decide to go on our own journey, following our own path instead of God's, God is there, waiting for us to turn around and remember who we are and whose we are. And even before we return to God, God meets us where we are, in fact, runs toward us and embraces us with compassion. Despite previous conflicts or bad decisions on our part, we are not scolded or punished, but instead are held in infinite love. How is God's love impacting you today? Where do you see this grace playing out in our world?

Let Us Pray Together

God our freely loving God, Your compassion for us surpasses all understanding. You embrace us even when we feel we don't deserve Your love. Be present with us, we pray, as we learn to trust Your path more deeply. Help us to know that even when we leave the path, You are there waiting for us, through the Divine love of Jesus. Amen.