**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

 **United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai’i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon April 26, 2020**

**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

GREETING/CALL TO WORSHIP **—**based on 1 Peter 1:17-19

Followers of Jesus, by his cross we are redeemed from the futility of sin.

By his rising, we are free from the fear of death.

By his love we are made new in the living and enduring Word of God.

***Alleluia! Thanks be to God!***

OPENING SENTENCES

 In a moment of tangible love that embraces the brokenness of betrayal and cross, the rays of Easter’s sunrise have illumined crypt and revived hope. Broken bread still nourishes and brings strength back to our faith. We, like the first believers, are given the courage to leave the grave clothes behind, and emerge into a new day—new life.

Call to Reconciliation

All mighty God,

our world is filled with corruption and a lust for power

 that tries to disguise itself as truth;

convenience that masquerades as goodness;

selfish pleasure that imitates love.

We confess to you, O God,

that we have been caught in the web of the world’s sin.

By the power of the Holy Spirit,

save us from these deceptions and free us for glad obedience,

that we may see the joy of Christ’s resurrection

and receive the promise of everlasting life. Amen.

Let us keep a short silence to reflect on what we have prayed.

AN Assurance

Hear the Good News: through the love and effort of Christ we are covered by grace. Therefore, allow God’s perfect and constant mercy flow over and through your life that we may live as forgiven and forgiving people!

A READING FROM THE GOSPELS

 Luke 24:13-35 *The Walk to Emmaus*

13Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. 18Then 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?’ 19He 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, 20and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21But 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. 22Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23and 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. 24Some 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.’ 25Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ 27Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29But 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. 30When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ 33That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ 35Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

SERMON *“Context: the Love of God”*

 The Gospel lesson we just heard never fails to make me smile—for a couple of reasons.

 First: because I love the notion that the disciples only recognized the risen Christ when he sat down to a meal with them and broke open a loaf of bread. I find it amazing and deeply satisfying that *that* is what opened their eyes and caused them to *see* him. When they recognize they are being fed—that is the moment they know it is Christ who is there with them, *and* he is feeding them!

 Another reason I like this this story so much is because it reminds me of a story of me and my father. It happened more than thirty years ago.

 When my father retired from his job at Young Brothers, my mother and I were afraid he was going to spend his days hanging around the house. However, especially to my mother’s relief, he very soon got himself into a routine.

Every weekday morning, he would rise before 6:00AM (as usual), get himself some juice, read the paper, and be out the door by 8:30, on to a No. 3 ewa-bound bus for Ala Moana.

 It was still Ala Moana, too, with Liberty House on the Diamond Head end, and Sears at the ewa end.

 Dad would have coffee and pastry with a small group of his friends—other retirees—and then they would take their small squares of cardboard, and sit on the stone wall outside of Sears where they would people watch and gossip for a couple of hours.

 I remember this vividly because, for some reason, one day, I was drawn to Ala Moana for some sort of shopping task. I got there after he did—we did not go together. I don’t remember what I was there for. I only remember that it must have been important because I wandered past Sears four times…and I know it was four times because on my fourth pass I was suddenly hit—square in the chest—with a wadded-up paper bag from McDonald’s.

 When I looked up to see who had done such a thing—it was my father!

 Apparently, he and his friends had been watching me going back and forth, ‘round and around, for quite some time. The first three times dad and his friends had been amused that I didn’t see waving or even *hear* him calling out to me.

 The fourth time by…he had stopped thinking this was funny, and beaned me with the bag.

 It’s funny how you can miss someone, or not immediately recognize them when you meet them out of context, or in an unexpected way. With my father, my context and expectation was seeing him at home.

 I can only surmise that this is, at least in part, what was happening in the Gospel reading we heard. Luke records that the two disciples were deep into conversation as they trudged the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

I imagine them “trudging,” walking wearily as though burdened with a heavy load, and indeed, the load they were carrying was heavy. It was the sorrow at losing their teacher and friend. It was also the great confusion that had arisen that morning with the report of the women who had gone to the tomb. They had come back saying that it was open and empty.

At first, the apostles did not believe them, but Peter was suddenly inspired to go and see for himself. He came back stunned. He had told them about the burial clothes that had been left behind—that was all that was left.

Peter left for home, for fishing nets and routine. Perhaps that is what the two on the road to Emmaus were looking for, too: a return to village life, a return to “normal.”

What they got instead was a companion, a stranger—or so they thought—who fell into step with them—Luke says he “came near and went with them.”

Then he asked them what they were discussing so seriously.

The two were so wrapped-up in their own experiences and emotions—their sorrow, confusion, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear—that the stranger’s question stopped them in their tracks.

How could he *not* know about the news that had shaken *them* to their very core of their foundation?!

Cleopas then lists all the expectations that had had of their teacher. Jesus, they tell the new companion, was a great prophet who had filled them with the hope that he was going to save them, and the nation. He was the one who was going to deliver them from their many trials and troubles. Instead, they had watched him being condemned and crucified. Even worse, something had happened to his body!

The stranger then begins to help them understand what has happened. He puts all they have experienced of Jesus (himself) into context. He begins with Moses and then takes them through all that had been written about the Messiah throughout all of Holy Scripture. He shows them God’s purpose and how it was made real in the life of Jesus, their teacher and friend.

Their hearts are lifted as he brings perspective and understanding to them. As the two disciples turn toward Emmaus, the stranger seems to want to continue on his journey, but they urge him to stop with them.

The final bit of context he gives them comes as he sits down with them. Although he is their guest, it is he who takes the bread, offers the blessing, and breaks the loaf to share it with them. In that moment, they see. They understand. They know—he has not left them; they are not alone to face the future; his love still has the power to give them all the strength and courage they need to continue their journey…and the ministry he has given them.

On that day thirty years ago, my father hit me in the chest with a crumpled-up paper bag from McDonalds. It did the trick, too. It lifted my attention away from my own purposes and allowed me to “see.” It gave me a new context in which to see.

Two thousand years ago, the risen Christ did the same thing—much gentler, I might add.

What Christ did then was help the disciples to “see” and understand their lives, and especially the most recent incidents, within the broader scope of God’s history and love of the human community. He helped them to see that they are now a part of that history.

The elements of recent history that they had been discussing were only going to be understandable—indeed, they would only be bearable—when embedded in the longer, larger history of God’s love. This was always going to be true.

God’s love is always with us. We are never alone, never left behind.

There is always a human danger in falling into a kind of isolation—we seem to constantly drift in that direction. Whether it is a couple of disciples getting out of Jerusalem, so shocked at what had happened to Jesus that they can think and talk of nothing else, or someone so buried in their own task that she can’t see her own father a few feet in front of her—the predicament is the same.

Our Good News is that God does not leave us there. God is constantly calling us back into context; calling us to see and understand our lives in relation to God’s love. It is a love that is so strong it moved aside every obstacle and came near as the disciples tried to escape their sorrow and fear. It went before them to Jerusalem to comfort and reassure the others.

God’s love returned to serve, to break apart a loaf of bread so that the beloved ones could be nourished and made strong.

This what Christ’s Spirit continues to offer us: a chance to be fed; and the assurance that we are not alone—no matter how shocked or bothered we are; no matter what is happening in the world around us.

We are companioned by, and offered the Spirit’s effort on our behalf, and we are made strong by it.

In this—our own time of chaos and upheaval, we too are tempted to sink into fear, to feel helpless; or to let hopelessness take over. It does not help that the conditions that are keeping us safe also seem to separate, even isolate many of us, and are causing so many other problems in other parts of the community and life.

But Christ’s Spirit is calling on us in this moment to experience the context and understanding that comes with his love for us. We are doing what we have to to keep ourselves and others safe and healthy. It is a sacrifice. It is our service, our act of love for the human community that God call’s God’s beloved.

We are that beloved, as are the ones to whom our sacrifice is offered. In doing this, we have joined Christ and disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the table where bread is waiting to open our eyes and hearts and lives and, as one writer has put it: enabling us “to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see pattern and purpose in human history” and in that seeing and meaning, to receive God’s greatest gift of the ability “to overcome the incongruities between what life is and what life ought to be”—which is to say: to be loved and to love.

That is our Good News—today and always: we are never alone, we are loved.

As the situation here in our community continues, I pray that we will all allow God’s love to break through the noise and emotion that surrounds us so that we may truly know the comfort of being in the heart of Christ, and that being made strong and hopeful, we will—together—be moved to respond to God’s love with brave new gestures of love and service that all may know what we know that:

Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed and his love continues to shine brightly here in this place and this community.

May this be so. Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE “Open My Eyes That I May See”

 *(Let us sing together)*

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION & THE LORD’S PRAYER

Let us unite our hearts in prayer, saying,

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the church throughout the world,

that as we celebrate the great fifty days of Easter,

we may renew our faith and strengthen our witness

 in Jesus’ name.

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For pastors, teachers, and ministers,

that they recognize the risen Christ in Word and Sacrament

and lead your church with wisdom, humility and courage;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the governments of the world and its leaders.

that they may resist the corruption of sin and serve

the common good;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our planet Earth,

that all people may be good stewards of its resources

and share in its abundance;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the poor and the stranger,

that they may receive a place of refuge and hope,

and that the church may offer the hospitality

the first disciple offered to Jesus on the

 road to Emmaus;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For the sick and those in distress.

Whether it be of body or spirit,

we pray that find support and compassionate

 friends and helpers be restored to fullness of life;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our neighbors,

that we may live together in peace and share in our resources;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

For our enemies,

that they may receive good things,

and that we, your servants, not return evil for evil;

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty God,

receive these prayers we offer

and by the power of your Holy Spirit

make us witnesses to the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through whom we pray the prayer he taught us saying

…*Our Creator who art in heaven…*

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**BENEDICTION**

May the grace of Jesus Christ our risen Lord, the love of God who raised him from the dead, and the power of the Holy Spirit who fills the world with new life bless and keep you. Alleluia!