

This past Tuesday, two days after Easter, I sat down at my computer to start working on this sermon and before I could write a word I was interrupted by the news that President Trump had issued an ultimatum to the Iranian Government on Truth Social saying:

"A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again. I don't want that to happen, but it probably will. We will find out tonight, one of the most important moments in the long and complex history of the World."

The dissonance for me was real in this moment. I was sitting down at my computer, still a bit exhausted from all of Holy Week and Easter celebrations, and I was looking forward to writing an Easter resurrection proclaiming sermon. But instead, here I am two days after Easter feeling scared and horrified about what may happen. As you all know, just before the deadline, the news

changed again. Trump posted again on Truth Social that a two week ceasefire has been established. I do not know how trustworthy that announcement is. I do not know what will happen in two weeks. And I suspect I am not the only one in this room who read that news with more exhaustion than relief.

Because that is where we are. We are living in a world where civilization-ending threats are made and walked back in the same news cycle. For me, sitting at my computer on Tuesday morning, the end of the world suddenly felt like a real possibility. And for me, this moment exposed something real. It illuminated the ways I have put faith into systems, people, places and things of this world that cannot save us. And I suspect I am not the only one.

And it is into this tension, into this particular moment of anxiety and fear, that we encounter our gospel text this morning.

This story is often referred to as the Road to Emmaus. It is the story of two followers of Jesus walking home after the worst week of their lives. We do not know much about these two people. Luke tells us one is named Cleopas and his companion is never named.

What we know for certain is that the pair had followed Jesus to Jerusalem and watched everything fall apart. They had witnessed the trial, the crucifixion, the burial. Then, early this morning before their walk, there was some chatter about an empty tomb but Cleopas and his companion do not stick around to find out. They decide to return home. They are grief-worn, uncertain, and not sure what to believe anymore.

They are attempting to return to their ordinary life before they met Jesus. They are walking away from Jerusalem, which means they are walking away from their community, away from the message Jesus was teaching, and away from the

chatter about an empty tomb. They are done. Or at least they are trying to be done.

And while they are walking, a stranger falls into step beside them.

The stranger asks, "What are you talking about?" And Luke tells us they stood still, looking sad.

They stood still. In the middle of the road. Looking sad. Their grief, exhaustion, anxiety and confusion have left them paralyzed.

Cleopas eventually answers the stranger with exhausted disbelief. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has happened?" And then Cleopas tells the stranger about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word, who was handed over by the chief priests to be crucified. And that they had hoped, they had hoped, that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They had hoped.

Past tense. Hope did not survive the weekend.

The stranger responds to Cleopas in an unexpected way. He does not say: I understand. Nor does he say: I am so sorry. He does not validate their grief and walk alongside them in comfortable silence. By the way, that is what any Pastoral Care teacher would tell you to do. Instead the stranger, who is Jesus, says: Oh, how foolish you are. How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared.

Slow of heart.

Notice, Jesus does not say slow of mind. They are not intellectually deficient. But rather they are slow of heart.

As we know from our Advent and Lenten series on the major and minor prophets, the prophets had been preparing the Jewish people for a story like this one. They foretold of a God who enters into suffering, who stands with the oppressed against

the powerful, who is acquainted with grief and rejection and the violence of empire. That story was not new to Cleopas and his companion. They knew it. They had studied it. They had sung it. They had prayed for it.

But when it actually happened, when the day came that the prophets had been pointing toward, the pain and humiliation of the cross was so overwhelming that their hearts were not able to see through their grief.

What is interesting to me is that Jesus does not offer them comfort in this moment. Instead, he offers them the whole story again, from the beginning, slowly, carefully, all the way through. And something begins to happen in them during Jesus' retelling. Their hearts begin burning within them. Their hearts began to catch up to the story.

I think we often expect faith to work the other way. We expect to understand first and then feel it.

We expect the theological argument to land before the heart catches fire. But these two disciples felt the truth of the resurrection burning in them before they could name what was happening. Their hearts knew before their eyes did.

They arrive at Emmaus. The stranger continues to walk but Cleopas and his companion urge him to stay.

And so he does.

He sits at the table with them. And he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them.

And their eyes are opened. They recognize Jesus.

And he vanishes.

I want to pause on that detail for a moment because it is strange and we should not pretend it is not. He vanishes. He did not just slip away, nor did he quietly leave. He simply is no longer there. And I

think Luke is telling us something important with that strangeness.

The risen Christ cannot be contained. Not by a room, not by a road, not by a moment of recognition, not even by our most profound encounter with him. The moment Cleopas and his companion finally see him, really see him, he is already somewhere else. Already on another road. Already falling into step beside someone else who is walking away from Jerusalem.

This is not Jesus disappearing. This is Jesus being exactly who Jesus is. Too large for any single moment to hold. Too alive to be fixed in one place. Too present everywhere to be kept anywhere.

There is a very human temptation, when we have a genuine encounter with the risen Christ, to try to hold onto it. To stay at that table. To make a monument out of the moment. To say: this is where I saw him, this is where I want to stay. But the

vanishing will not allow it. Every time we think we have found the place where Jesus is, he is already ahead of us, already in the next unexpected place, already breaking bread at a table we have not yet found our way to. The vanishing is not a loss. Rather, it is an invitation. There is more ahead than you have yet seen.

Luke tells us that Cleopas and his companion, that very hour, got up and returned to Jerusalem immediately. They returned as quickly as possible with the Easter news that Jesus is indeed alive and was made known to them in the breaking of bread.

My hunch is that some of us are walking away from Jerusalem this morning. The events of this past week caused the Easter joy to drain right out of us before it even had a chance to settle in. We had hoped. And the hope got complicated.

I had my own Emmaus moment this week. I was sitting in a meeting with our Refugee Resettlement

team on Wednesday evening, and we were talking about one of the families we are walking alongside right now. They are living in a very precarious situation that is not their fault. Visa status, parole reinstatement, paperwork deadlines all come together in a way that makes it seem that the system is designed to grind people down rather than lift them up. And I was sitting there feeling genuinely hopeless. Not anxious. Not worried. Hopeless. The kind of hopeless where you cannot quite see the road ahead anymore.

And then Don Lu, one of the faithful members of that team, spoke up. He started painting a picture of how things might come together. The paperwork arriving on time. Our congregation continuing to show up. This family, who are among the most hardworking and hopeful people I have ever met, continuing to be exactly who they are. And somewhere in the middle of Don talking, for just a moment, I saw it. Not a solution. Not a guarantee.

Just a glimpse of the road continuing. Just enough light to keep walking.

And that was Jesus. On that road. Falling into step beside a team of tired people who did not know where to go next, and reminding us that the story is not over.

That is what the risen Christ does. He does not wait for us to have it together. He shows up in the middle of the meeting, in a moment of unexpected possibility, and he opens our eyes just enough to keep us moving.

And then he sends us back.

Jesus does not tell Cleopas and his companion: stay home, go rest, someone else will handle it. Jesus sends them running back to Jerusalem. Right back into the middle of everything that is hard and unresolved and frightening.

And I believe that is where we are being sent this morning too.

I know this is not an abstract call for many of you. I know that what happens in the world this week will land in your actual life, in your actual work, in your actual relationships. I know that some of you are exhausted and not sure what faithfulness looks like right now.

Running back to Jerusalem looks different for each of us. But here is what I know it can look like.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like staying engaged when disengagement would be easier. Reading carefully, thinking clearly, refusing to be swept along by either panic or complacency. The discipline of paying attention and remaining curious is itself a form of faithfulness.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like praying specifically and seriously for the people making decisions that affect millions of lives, whether you voted for them or not. Prayer is not a substitute for action but is the ground from which action grows.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like showing up for the vulnerable people in our community. The neighbor who is frightened. The family who is struggling. The person in your pew who is carrying something heavy.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like having honest conversations across difference, including political difference, without demonizing the person on the other side of the table. The road to Emmaus is a story about two people encountering Jesus through a stranger. That kind of meeting does not happen when we have stopped talking to people who see things differently than we do.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like supporting the institutions that protect human dignity regardless of who is in power. This week our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, posted a statement saying: "As people called to honor the dignity of every human being, we cannot remain silent in the face of such language. It

betrays our shared humanity and must be rejected."

They also urged all Presbyterians to use their voices to let our representatives know that we do not support this escalation. I want to say that I do not believe this is a partisan act. It is a human one. It is what it looks like to say: we believe every person bears the image of God, and we will not be silent when that is threatened.

Running back to Jerusalem looks like coming back to this church, this community, this room, every week, and letting your eyes be opened again to the presence of the risen Christ who has been walking beside you the whole time.

Because the road to Emmaus does not end in Emmaus. It ends in Jerusalem. Back in the middle of the world, back in the middle of the struggle, back where the risen Christ is making himself known in the most ordinary and unexpected of moments,

and where his people are called to bear witness to that which will outlast every empire.

That God is alive. That love wins. That the tomb is empty.

Even this week. Especially this week.

Let us keep walking.