

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, April 26, 2020
“A Strange Encounter” *(Luke 24:13-35)*

Imagine the scene. Hills which have long been a dreary shade of dusty brown, now sprouting a bright green fuzz. Here and there, bold, blood red poppies and shy wild cyclamen add splashes of colour. Birds are singing - ones that will spend their summers here and ones that are just passing through Israel en route to their nesting grounds in Europe. The air feels soft and fresh. There's an aroma of blossoms on the breeze. It's a perfect springtime morning, the sort of day when it feels good just to be alive; the sort of day when it is a treat to be out for a walk.

Two people are doing just that. They are walking down the road that leads from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One of them is Cleopas; the other is not named. Given that this is the first century, and this is a patriarchal society in which women tend not to be named or even counted, it is possible the second individual is female. Let us call her Sarah after the first Hebrew matriarch. Sarah and Cleopas are surrounded by incredible beauty but they appear oblivious: their shoulders are hunched; their heads are down; they are absorbed in their own conversation. These disciples of Jesus are grieving the loss of their leader, their teacher, their friend. The world hasn't changed. The season of spring is still unfolding as it has in ages past. But they have changed: they have no eyes to see; no ears to hear. Their grief is totally absorbing.

Can we put ourselves in their shoes? Have we ever lost someone we loved, and found ourselves unable to do more than go through the motions? Yes, we were at the funeral service, but afterwards, we couldn't say who else was there or what was said. Yes, we were sat down with a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches, but it might as well have been bitter medicine and sawdust. Yes, life went on: friends and relatives

decamped to return to their daily routines; we were expected to pick ourselves up and carry on, but it all seemed so wrong. How can there be birthday cards for husband / wife, daughter / son, brother / sister when we no longer have one? How can the world keep turning when the one who gave us such joy is no longer present?

At one time, I thought that grief was an emotion evoked only by death - the death of my beloved turtle, Myrtle, the death of my school mate, Linda. But then I took Margaret Brillinger's course, "Loss, a Time to Mourn" , and discovered that any loss - great or small - gives rise to grief. Even happy occasions like a graduation have a grief component: while we have the excitement of launching into a new stage in our lives, we are leaving behind our school / college / university and the friends we've made.

During this global pandemic, grief is very natural. Although we may not have had a loved one die of COVID-19, we have all lost our sense of normalcy. The pattern of our days has been changed. There are places we cannot be like in libraries and movie theatres. There are things we cannot do like go out for a meal or come to church or have a party. The stores that are still open do not look the same with their security guards monitoring the flow of customers; their lines indicating proper distancing; their shields around cashiers. We have lost our connections. Yes, we may be phoning more and writing longer emails. We may use Zoom for virtual meetings and coffee times. We may watch recorded or live streamed worship services. But this is not the same as getting together in person - exchanging hugs; sharing food; sitting side by side. We have lost our general sense of safety. Plans that appeared well founded are suddenly not working out: businesses are floundering; jobs, disappearing; opportunities vanishing. We have been brought face to face with our own mortality. As the daughter of

a 104 year old mother and a father who died at 96, I was figuring I had a good quarter century left. Along comes COVID-19 with experts explaining that seniors are especially vulnerable because once we reach the age of 65, no matter how fit and healthy we are, we start losing our ability to fight off disease. If this virus develops to the point a ventilator is required, it is questionable whether it would be helpful for someone over 65 to be placed on one. Suddenly, my hold on life seems a lot more fragile.

Given these losses during this pandemic, is it any wonder we may be feeling sad, and more than a little confused as we listen to all the conflicting opinions about where we might go from here. Sad and confused like Cleopas, and Sarah who have heard the reports of the empty tomb and the angel's message, "he has risen", but are uncertain what it all means. As they walk along, they are going over and over all that has happened, trying to make sense of it, as we may be trying to make sense both of the pandemic and of why a middle aged man in Nova Scotia would go on a rampage and kill 22 people. Along comes someone who doesn't walk on past as strangers normally do. He falls into step beside them. He doesn't simply wish them "good day" before turning away. He asks them: "what are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" He gives them an opportunity to share their story. What a gift it is when someone listens, really listens without interrupting to launch into their own tale, without disagreeing, without trying to fix things. Listens us into expressing what is on our hearts and minds. Listens with attention and compassion.

Finally, these two disciples lapse into silence. Then and only then does the stranger speak and begin to set their experience within a larger context. Sort of like the historian who described our present pandemic as the latest in a series of events

including the Black Death carried by rats across medieval Europe, and the Spanish Flu that rode the rails with soldiers returning from World War I. This may be new for us, but not for humankind. The stranger sets the life and death of Jesus in the context of scripture. He reminds Cleopas and Sarah of words with which they are already familiar and links Jesus into the ongoing story of God's relationship with human beings. Could it be that Jesus is the new liberator, the one who has come that people might have abundant life? Is it possible that his death was not a misfortune they should have been wise enough to avoid, but part of God's plan? All their questions are not immediately answered; all their confusion does not disappear. But they feel their hearts warmed. Something is happening. Something is shifting. We may have had this feeling during this strange time when someone showed us unexpected caring or we read a thoughtful reflection or we listened to a piece of music like Pepper Choplin's "We Are Not Alone" or "These Rocks Will Shout" from the Easter cantata that didn't happen.

As they've talked and listened, they've covered the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Sarah and Cleopas have arrived at their destination, but the stranger appears to be continuing his journey. The disciples urge him to stay - it is almost sunset. Why not join them for dinner and remain overnight? It is the sort of hospitality we cannot offer in this time of physical distancing. It is the sort of hospitality we may be longing to extend and receive in this time of social isolation: just to cook for someone else; to sit at table and chat face-to-face. When such hospitality is extended and received, walls break down. Bonds are formed as food and laughter are shared.

The stranger accepts their offer. He has the honour of saying the blessing; taking the bread and breaking it. As he speaks these traditional words and performs these

familiar actions, as the disciples feel the piece of bread touch their hands, their eyes are opened. Cleopas and Sarah recognize this stranger is none other than their leader, their teacher, their friend. The women were right after all - Christ is alive! No more sadness and confusion. Filled with fresh energy, they run back up the road to Jerusalem. They cannot wait to tell the others their news: "We have seen the Lord!"

Easter Sunday this year was not like any Easter before it. In the afternoon, Mom and I joined the Moderator and United Church people from across Canada for a live streamed communion service. It had its technical glitches. It was hard to join in the singing with just my Mom sitting silently beside me in her Retirement Residence room. We couldn't share the tortilla Richard Bott broke: we made do with pieces of hot cross bun. And yet, afterwards, my Mom declared: "that was the best service ever." The sadness of her isolation, of not being able to join her family for Easter dinner was transformed into joy.

God surprises us by encountering us at times, and in ways and places we had not expected. Thanks be to God.