

“God Longs to be Known”

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Based upon John 14:17-21

Friends in the faith, I miss you just as my sign says. I am thankful that we are still gathering together on Sunday mornings as best we can. I have a few buddies here with me this morning, but I don't see the worship committee flurrying about, or hear the children in the nursery or the choir rehearsing, and I don't smell the coffee being prepared. Oh, how we took all of that for granted, just assuming that's how our Sunday mornings at church would always be.

How is this walk of faith going for you these days? The Rev. Jill Duffield, the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook wrote in this week's reflections: “I confess to feeling a sadness right now that refuses to succumb to the complete joy Christ came to give. I survey the state of creation and giving a defense for the hope that lives within me is challenging because frankly I find this hope to be quite lacking in many ways. The pandemic's toll grows. The virus's destructive tentacles leave no aspect of our world free of its impact and we may be in this together, but we are not coming together. I don't feel the love of God swirling, growing, transforming and reconciling in ways that I wish I did.”

WELL.... we **HAVE** witnessed acts of kindness, feats of great courage and sacrifice and deeds of generosity. A small church in our presbytery, in addition to doing well with stewardship and people meeting their pledges (which has surprised the session to no end) has a benevolence fund that has grown to beyond what it's ever been due to the generosity of the members. So now this church can help people in the community who are wrought with anxiety about their own safety and security. We **ARE** encouraged by God's presence in the work of scientists and medical researchers. We **ARE** inspired by high school and college seniors determined more than ever to be the future even though “Pomp and Circumstance” is not playing in their ears.

God is at work in the world because our God is persistent in these kinds of ways. But frankly, don't we want more from God right now? Be honest!

We don't talk about where God is in the big picture moving forward because we really don't know how to talk about it without sounding like we are trying to get quick answers. **We are people of hope**, but truth be told grief is overflowing, the most vulnerable are becoming more so, the wrangling over when to open the economy is flying in the face of the medical advice to not open too soon, the prediction of 147,000 people dying in our country from Covid-19 is unfathomable and we want to hug our grandchildren. We are people of hope, but we might just not be jiving with that right now. Frankly God, we need some resurrection here, we want our Easter Sunday morning back.

So, let's go with Jesus to that place where he took his disciples in our text from John's Gospel this morning. “That was over 2,000 years ago,” you say. “Can't we at least stay in this century?”

Let's go! Let's listen!

This is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. Things were about to change in monumental ways. The disciples would soon have to carry on without the Jesus they knew, loved and followed. How is that walk of faith going to go for these disciples? Jesus' words sound very instructional:

- If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and if you do that you will know God's love and I will still be known to you.
- I am not going to be with you any longer, but the Spirit of truth will abide in you, that Spirit that will encourage you and help you keep the truth of Jesus present in the world.
- You will not be alone or abandoned. You will not be an orphan.

So, as we sit there with these disciples, what do you think were the looks on their faces? Probably not, "Oh sure, Jesus. Whatever you say. No problem!" They are headed for a monumental shift in the way they knew life to be.

What's really happening here according to the 20th-century theologian, Rudolf Bultman is the question, "Can the disciples still love Jesus when he is gone? Will the intimacy they have experienced as Jesus' followers be undercut by his departure? Does the relationship they had with Jesus depend on that physical presence?" These are big questions facing the life of these disciples and they are scary questions.

So, as we sit with them, maybe the questions for us in this century are: "Can we still love God when the world is changing in ways that we might not want it to change? Does our relationship with God depend on going back to things exactly as they were before Covid-19 came onto the scene? Are our prayers currently "God, please let us get back..." rather than "Equip us to move forward!" These are big questions. And maybe a little scary.

Jesus' answer to the disciples and to us is an unequivocal "YES!" We can still love God in the face of monumental changes because God has equipped us:

- with commandments rooted in love
- with the Spirit of truth that abides in us
- both of which are timeless and relevant in any age and in any current event circumstance.

Since the beginning of creation, God has longed to be known to us and seen to it that it is possible.

There is a story in the *Acts of the Apostles* where Paul is in Athens and talking about this altar built by the Athenians with an inscription "To an unknown god," and Paul says to them, "Oh, that is not the God I worship. Our God longs to be known and revealed and even in the mysteries will go to the ends of the earth to let us know that God is near." Jesus' answer to the disciples in the face of monumental change is "Yes, you can still love God and God will equip you with commandments and the Spirit, but you can't love God fully when you only want to cling to cherished memories or retreat into the way things used to be."

God longs to be known. The question for those disciples and for us is "Do we long to know God...when it's not going to be on our terms?" If you looked on my bookshelf, you would see a book that has been well used and well-worn in many readings and sermons and Bible studies called "Getting Involved with God." The author is Ellen Davis, an Old Testament scholar and her thesis is that there is no question about God's desire to be involved with us. The question is do we want to be involved with God?

She writes: “The Bible is relentlessly realistic about the world, the way it’s always been with difficulties all too real that are at times intractable. The biblical witness in no way pretends that things are better than they are in the world and the Bible definitely does not entice us to imagine that we can transcend difficulties through some kind of spiritual superiority. God is involved with us and we hear this message affirmed in many different voices of psalmists who cry out to God across the full range of human emotions from grief to joy, from rage to gratitude. We hear God’s involvement through the prophets, storytellers, preachers and teachers. As it turns out, as we read and study and learn and pray, God’s life is as complex as our own, and it is that way precisely because God’s life is bound up so inextricably with ours.”

Davis’ book is about getting involved with a God who longs to be known to us and staying involved, what it takes, what it costs, how it feels, what it looks like and why in the world we would want to do it anyway. God longs to be known. Do we long to know God? Do we long to stay involved with God when we are not in the driver’s seat?

If we are brave and willing, we need to do some reflecting on resurrection and Easter Sunday and what that looks like going forward. The story of Jesus doesn’t just jump to resurrection. Easter Sunday doesn’t happen without Good Friday and the cross and the sadness, the fear and uncertainty and the deep yearning which pains the heart.

Jill Duffield reflects further on her current feeling of sadness writing, “Maybe I should pay close attention to my growing sadness rather than avoid the circumstances that elicit it. I don’t go to this sadness without the Holy Spirit, a God who is so involved. Though I go to some painful places, **these are the very spaces where resurrection happens.**”

Let’s talk about walking because I know there are walkers in this congregation, speed walkers, meanderers, those who use canes or walkers or are assisted on walking paths in wheel chairs. It’s all walking. Diogenes the Cynic and Greek philosopher ruminated on walking and was critical of those who just wanted to walk away from challenges and retreat back to what they thought was a better time. This pondering was later picked up by Saint Augustine with the phrase, “Solvitur ambulando.” It is solved by walking... not walking away not walking backwards, but walking. Perhaps walking in hope.

Walking in hope doesn’t mean that we have to leave the yearning and the sadness and the uncertainty behind or push it to the side. Because this yearning is the language of intimacy of a God deeply involved with us in the work and discernment that we must do in facing a world of monumental change.

Now, I want to emphasize here that we also need to pay attention in these days to our mental health and the mental health of our loved ones. This time of pandemic in the world is a time of deep yearning that can be painful. It’s all right to feel that yearning. But if we feel that a loved one or we are plunging into an abyss of depression, helpless isolation and despair, there is help. Elizabeth and I can help you access that help. Mental Health Awareness Week begins tomorrow, but in any week and in any time, there is help and a community there for you if these “Good Friday” feelings just get to be too much.

After the resurrection, things did not go back to the way they were, the disciples could not lock themselves into a closet of cherished memories alone or retreat into using energy making things exactly as they were before the resurrection. The disciples had to prepare themselves to continue the human outworking of Jesus Christ. And that's what the church is still called to be and to do. We are people of hope doing the human outworking of Jesus Christ whether or not we gather in a building.

Part of the preparation for our work is realizing where we have been spiritually blind, possibly even foolish. Mary C. Earl who writes about the mystic Julian of Norwich writes that Julian would tell us to stop projecting our anger and disappointments on God and others and be honest about our own actions that have their roots in spiritual blindness. Before this virus had surfaced, we knew, but didn't always face, that there are great inequities among us. Before the virus, we thought we had a lot of control and certain things could never happen to us, but now we realize that borders sometimes mean nothing.

Someone said to me this week, "We might all be in this together. We might all be in the same storm, but we are in very different boats. Some of us are in yachts; some of us are in kayaks; and some of us are struggling in this storm in a leaky inner tube.

Jesus did go off by himself for quiet times with God. But Jesus' union with God was never a private coalition meant only for their benefit. There was always an eye towards creation and how we are doing. That's what the church is still called to be, involved with God, growing into a deeper knowledge of God, **ALWAYS** with an eye on creation and how it's doing and where we can help.

As we walk in hope in this time of pandemic our prayer can be, "Heal our blindness, open our eyes that we might see, align our yearnings with God's yearning that we might be in intimacy with true resurrection and what that new Easter Sunday morning might look like for all God's children." God will speak through the earthquake, wind, fire and pandemic because God longs to be involved. God longs to be known. Do **WE** long to know God? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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