

April 26, 2020 Lead Us Safe to Shore Luke 24:13-35 Caledon East United Church Rev. Ross Leckie

Hearing the words to the lyrics of the song that Ruby and Olivia shared with us, "My Lighthouse, a song made popular by a Christian rock group from Bangor, Northern Ireland reminded me about this parable from Theodore Wedel. It is a story about something that was common nearby lighthouses-that is lifesaving stations.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought of themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Now, some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from sea. So, they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown! *

The parable was presented to warn against churches that had become too outwardly successful and had forgotten their purpose of being Christ's witnesses and speaking and acting in ways that kept the deep needs of people central to their mission. We always need to be relevant to people's lives, where they hurt and hope, where they curse and pray, where they hunger for meaning and thirst for significant relationships. The church always needs to deliver a healing message to persons struggling in alienation and despair. We need to be a lifesaving station and not a club, a hospital and the garden of the spiritual life---not a museum.

On this third Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves traveling a road that's uncomfortably familiar. Every one of us, regardless of identity or circumstance, knows this road. We've walked it. We've lost our way on it. We've left it behind and then returned to it. The road is the road to Emmaus, and we recognize it by the words we speak when our feet hit its rough and winding way one more time: "But we had hoped."

But we had hoped the tumor wasn't malignant. We had hoped our marriage would get easier. We had hoped our son would come home. We had hoped the depression would lift. We had hoped to keep our jobs. We had hoped to carry the baby to term. We had hoped the pandemic would spare our family. We had hoped for a peaceful death. We had hoped to experience God's presence when we pray. We had hoped our faith would survive.

The words we speak on the road to Emmaus are words of pain, disappointment, bewilderment, and yearning. They are the words we say when we've come to the end of our hopes — when our expectations have been dashed, our cherished dreams are dead, and there's nothing left to do but leave, defeated and done. *But we had hoped.*

When the travelers reach Emmaus, Jesus gives them the option to continue on without him. In fact, he makes as if *he's* leaving, placing them in a position where they have to be absolutely intentional and definitive about their desire regarding him. Do they want him to stay? Are they willing to risk hosting a stranger in their home? Do they wish to go deeper with this man who makes their hearts burn, or are they content to leave the encounter where it stands, and return to their ordinary lives without learning more?

This journey is on land, not on the sea you may be saying. How does it fit with providing a Lighthouse and/or discovering one? Well, what would have happened if Cleopas and his companion said goodbye to Jesus on the road? How would their story have ended if Jesus walked away? The companions would have missed so much. The Messiah they thought they knew and loved would have remained a stranger. They would not have experienced the intimate knowing of the broken bread, the shared cup. The joy of resurrection would not have become theirs.

It is always somewhat surprising to me, Jesus's unwavering commitment to my freedom. He will not impose. He will not overpower. He will not coerce. He'll make as if he's moving on, giving me space, time, and freedom to decide what I really want. Do I desire to go deeper? Am I ready to get off the road of my failures and defeats? Am I willing to let the guest become my host? Do I *really* want to know who the stranger is? "*Stay with us.*" That's what Cleopas and his companion say to Jesus. Stay with us. An invitation. A welcome. The words a patient Jesus waits to hear.

Once Jesus and his companions are seated around the table, Jesus takes bread. He takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. So small a thing. So small a thing that changes everything. During these hard days of sheltering in place, hearing horrific stories of death and suffering, and fearing for our futures as individuals, families, communities, and nations, it's difficult to trust in the transformative power of small things. A bit of bread. A sip of wine. A common table. A shared meal.

But the Emmaus story speaks to this power — the power of the small and the commonplace to reveal the divine. God shows up during a quiet evening walk on a backwater road. God is made known around our dinner tables. God reveals God's self when we take, bless, break, and give. God is present in the rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days.

What does this mean right now? It means God is in the text you send to the lonely neighbor you can't visit during quarantine. God appears in the Zoom gathering, the family Facebook post, the phone call, the greeting card. Jesus is the stranger you see across the street when you walk your dog — both of you smiling beneath your protective masks. The sacred is in the conversation you have with your stir-crazy child, the technology you attempt to master so that you can talk to your friends across the distances, the loved one who challenges you to reframe the story of these days in the light of God's inexplicable provision and love. If the Emmaus story tells us anything, it tells us that the risen Christ is not confined in any way by the seeming smallness of our lives. Wherever and whenever we make room, Jesus comes, he is our Lighthouse.

"But we had hoped." Yes, we had. Of course we had. So very many things are different right now than we had hoped they'd be. And yet. The stranger who is the Saviour still meets us on the lonely road to Emmaus. The guest who becomes our host still nourishes us with Presence, Word, and Bread.

So keep walking. Keep telling the story. Keep honoring the stranger. Keep attending to your burning heart. Christ is risen. He is no less risen on the road to Emmaus than he is anywhere else. So look for him. Listen for him. He will lead us safe to shore. And when Christ lingers at your door, honoring your freedom, but yearning to feed you, say what he longs to hear: *Stay with me*. Amen

I'm asking Anne to lead us in the hymn, Stay with Us through the Night. The background to this hymn written by Walter Farquharson in 1988, was that he and his wife took his mother-in-law to the hospital when she had a health crisis. They stayed for some time at the hospital as she was cared for. The words were Walter's recollection from that night of sitting vigil with her. #182 (Voices United)

Acknowledging inspiration from:

*Wheatcroft, Letter to Laymen, May-June 1962, p.1, a paraphrase of the original by Wedel, Theodore, "Evangelism----the Mission of the Church to Those Outside Her Life", The Ecumenical Review, October 1953, p.24

Thomas, Debie, Journey with Jesus blog, April 20, 2020