



**“Enduring a Crisis”**  
**Scripture – Luke 24:13-35**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, April 26, 2020**

As we did last Sunday, we peer into another episode from the day that divided time between *then* and *now*, between darkness and light – the day the women discovered the empty tomb. Two followers of Jesus, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed, are walking away from Jerusalem. You remember that some of the disciples slipped into hiding somewhere in the Holy City terrified that those who engineered the demise of Jesus might hunt for them next. These two followers of Jesus may have also feared for their lives, but rather than tucking away in some remote location, they chose to hotfoot it out of town.

Our text says that while they were walking, they talked about the crisis that had suddenly engulfed them. Life was on an upward trajectory when disaster struck. These two were in the early stages of trying to wrap their minds around the death of Jesus. Put yourself in their shoes. What emotions would be erupting within you?

I suspect they were in shock. Jesus was snatched from them and they were struggling to fathom all that had happened. It seemed surreal. It was as if they were living a dream. They were desperate to wake up and discover it had all been a terrible nightmare.

You may have had similar feelings when news first began to dribble out concerning the Coronavirus. You may have heard that a deadly virus had emerged in China that was highly contagious. Soon there was news that the virus was spreading to other countries. Then, the alert, that it would reach our shores. Suddenly there were thousands of cases in the U.S. and all of us needed to shelter in place and practice social distancing to halt the transmission of this highly contagious and exceptionally deadly disease.

Even though I am now leading worship services in an empty sanctuary and participating in meetings via Zoom, there is a part of me that still finds this global pandemic difficult to fathom. It takes a while for shock to give way to a new reality. The two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus were detailing the events of the previous week because they were struggling to assimilate their new normal. Can you identify with their struggle?

No doubt these two were also contending with fear. They were facing a clear and present danger and they were afraid. Fear of something that can harm or kill us is a wise and proper response. If we are completely fearless, we will take unwise risks and such recklessness can eventually destroy us.

On the other hand, if we allow our fears to *dominate* us, they will paralyze us. Such inaction stimulates our fears to spin out of control, enflaming our anxieties and jeopardizing our mental health. Fear of Covid-19 should prompt us to take appropriate precautions. However, irrational fear of this virus can spawn paranoia and render us helpless.

In addition to grappling with shock and fear, the two followers on the road to Emmaus were seized by profound sadness. The loss of a loved one prompts deep grief. Tears flow and we physically ache. It can so dominate our mind that we have difficulty thinking. Our text says that the two were talking with each other about all that had happened in the past few days. The death of Jesus weighed heavily on them. When the risen Christ began to walk alongside them and they did not recognize him, he asked, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

Our passage says, “They stood still, their faces downcast.” That’s not difficult to picture is it? Profound sadness makes your body droop. An invisible weight drags your gaze downward. That posture may say something more about the two followers of Jesus. When they lost their leader, their dreams evaporated. Their future was erased. What will they do now that they have lost their guide? His crucifixion buried their purpose, buried their joy, and buried their hope. The current global pandemic has not erased our future, but it certainly has posted some question marks.

As I was working on this sermon, a friend called and during the course of our conversation he said that a woman he had known for many years through work, had taken her own life. He went on to say that her fiancé died in the Viet Nam War and she never made peace with it. She never married and she always carried a rough edge.

Many believe that life is supposed to be fair, and when life is cruel they become mired in their grief and refuse to come to terms with it. They allow bitter feelings to turn them brittle. They fail to recognize that they are not the only one to experience a severe loss. Their anger at life or at God consumes them.

I am not saying that people need to find closure for their loss. There are some losses that defy closure. How could parents ever find closure on the death of their child? They will never shut the door on their memories or completely vanquish their heartache. However, many will learn to live with the tragedy and not allow it to make them cynical and surly.

Some blows in life are definitely harsher than others, but everyone faces challenges, everyone deals with disappointments, and everyone has heartaches. The course and quality of our lives depends to a large extent on how we handle the challenges that present themselves and the blows life delivers. We must handle them as best we can and with whatever support we have because we do not have the luxury of expunging the bad times and starting over.

A colleague points out a sign she saw. At the top, in bold letters, the sign read simply: **Life**. Beneath it, the fine print read: “Available for a limited time only, limit one per customer, subject to change without notice, provided ‘as is’ without any warranties, your mileage may vary.”<sup>1</sup>

We are given one life and it comes with no promise of ease. We encounter challenges and hardships and we decide whether to make the best or the worst of them. The beauty of being a follower of Jesus is that we never have to face difficulties alone.

Our text points out that Jesus walked alongside the two who were heading to Emmaus and he encouraged them to pour out their story. They were downcast because the authorities had crucified their master. But then they mentioned the glimmer of hope. Before leaving Jerusalem, they overheard the women who visited the tomb declare that the tomb was empty.

The three reach Emmaus and it appears the stranger is going further, but they urge him to stay with them. They still have no clue who he is, but they are attracted to him. Finally, when they sit down to break bread together, the scales fall from their eyes and they realize that the stranger is Jesus. Then, without skipping a beat, the passage says, “and he vanished from their sight.”

This intriguing story is found only in the Gospel of Luke. Its writer was not simply documenting a story he had uncovered. He was writing to the second and third generations of Christians – people who had never seen Jesus in the flesh – and he was wrestling with a question all followers of Christ have encountered. How does God come to us?

It is fascinating that neither archaeologists nor Biblical scholars have ever located the village of Emmaus. Most of the towns and villages in the Bible are known. Name a spot and you can pinpoint it on a map of the ancient world. But not Emmaus. The location of this village eludes us.

Could it be because Emmaus represents not a physical place, not a literal village, but rather, a place where healing occurs?

Could it be that the walk to Emmaus represents our grief journey when we suffer? Could it be that chapter of our lives when we are struggling to make sense of a crisis? Could it be that road we walk when we experience shock, fear, and sadness, and eventually realize that we can endure the current crisis because we are not alone?

Jesus appeared to followers whose hopes were crucified and buried. They recognized him not in a sacred meal elevated to special status in the church, but in an ordinary meal in an ordinary house. And what happened when they recognized him? He disappeared from their sight.

That is how it is with God. Although God is present with us always, our recognition of God is fleeting.

While we shelter in place, while the cases mount, while the economy declines, while the future recedes into a fog, we squint to see God and to be reassured that we will get through this unnerving time. We will get through it. We will, one day, look back on it.

Never surrender to despair. Never abandon hope. Beckon your valor because our Creator is a God of resurrection who is always with us and lifts us from the valley of sorrow to the light of a new day.

#### NOTES

1. Susan Sparks, an excerpt from her book *It's Still Life*, Day1.org, April 14, 2020.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Gracious God, the Coronavirus continues to extract a heavy toll in our nation and around the planet. We lament the rising death toll of this global pandemic and pray for an end to its spread. The numbers are so staggering it is easy to forget that each digit represents a unique human being who still had work to perform and love to share. Each death leaves a gaping hole in the hearts of their family and friends. May those who grieve be supported by loved ones, comforted by fond memories, and buoyed by the hope of eternal life.

Comforting God, the daily threat of this deadly disease is physically and emotionally fatiguing. The possibility of it striking us or our loved ones claws at our soul unleashing anxieties that unnerve us. This invisible demon elicits fears that unsettle us and rob us of sleep.

Ever-present God, in these unsettling times, we pray that our hearts may settle in you. In these days of worry, we pray that we may learn to breathe deeply, release all that makes us tense, and experience your abiding peace that passes all understanding.

God, this crisis has prompted laser-like focus on those who have dedicated their lives to a ministry of healing. We stand in awe of all health care workers who rally to the aid of those battling for their lives. Their dedication to the ministry of healing despite the risk to themselves elicits in us a hushed reverence for their devotion to the well-being of others.

We pray that they may remain healthy, strong, and resolute; and may they be assured of the enormous value of their efforts and the high-esteem in which they are held.

Everlasting God, we pray that all may understand how much we need you and how much we need the care and support of one another for our lives to be resilient. Now, hear us as we pray the hope that Jesus had for our world, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**