

**Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 18, 2021**

**Hymns:** 313 – Oh Worship the King; All in All; 263 – They set out on the homeward road; 262 – Come to us, Beloved Stranger

**Scripture:** Luke 24:13-35; John 21:1-14

**Sermon Title:** The New Normal

*Luke 24:13-35 (New International Version)*

*Now that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

*Jesus asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”*

*They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”*

*“What things?” he asked.*

*“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”*

*He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

*As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.*

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts*

*burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

*They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*

*John 21:1-14 (New International Version)*

*Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”*

*“No,” they answered.*

*He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*

*Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.*

*Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish – 153 – but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

Normal. That's all I want; everything back to normal. That's all anyone wants. I'm pretty sure that's all you want too. Not just the "Maritime Bubble normal"; normal. Whatever normal means.

And if you think that's what you want, imagine the disciples. Imagine the friends of Jesus. Imagine those who loved him, those who were there when he was arrested, those who watched him die. Imagine how much they wanted "normal" too; Jesus with them. Jesus walking among them. Jesus speaking with them, laughing with them, sharing a meal with them. Jesus alive. That, for three wonderful years together, was normal. That's all they wanted. But now? What with all that happened, that first Easter weekend? What, for them, did "normal" mean anymore?

Like for Cleopas, and his travelling companion, the other friend of Jesus. They are on their way to Emmaus, eager to put as much distance as possible between themselves as Jerusalem, between themselves and Easter. You can't blame them - unlike us they don't know the whole story - they'd left town before the news of Easter Sunday - so all they know is they've had enough, that their hopes and dreams and prayers were all crushed to nothing by the events of the previous days. The Jesus into whom they had placed their trust, their hearts, their future, had been very publically and very efficiently and very nastily put to death. And now it seemed that the best they could do was pick up the pieces and get on with their lives, such as they were. So it is one foot in front of the other, and up and down the rough Judean hills to Emmaus, early that Sunday morning.

It wasn't unusual to be joined by another, as there was a certain safety in numbers, and it wasn't unusual for travelers to talk. "Why the long faces?" asked the newcomer, and they said "You must be kidding, where have you been, you must be the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know what happened." And they told the stranger the whole sad tale, from the arrest to the trial to the torture to the cross, all the way to the stone sealing the whole story shut, tight as a tomb.

"We thought everything changed," they told the stranger. "We thought that at last there was hope, at last there was a chance, at last there was something other than brute force and disappointment and heartache and death. But were we ever proved wrong. Again. Now nothing's changed. Now nothing's better. Now everything is back to normal. Not the good normal; the bad normal. The normal before Jesus. Everything's back to that normal."

Or is it?

Change of scene. Easter is over, weeks ago, the excitement of those Jerusalem days now fading, and The Twelve - sorry, now The Eleven - are back in Galilee, back in Capernaum, back home. They're standing around, shuffling their feet,

peering at the sky, hands in their pockets, wondering, “What now?” The crucifixion is over and done, thank God, the joyous Resurrection appearances seem more and more like a dream, and Jesus is with them no more, so they think, and they wonder what to do next, and what seems best is to think about what to eat, and nothing makes more sense than to catch a few fish.

It is all they know to do. It is all they have ever done, until those three years ago when they put their nets aside and followed the one who had called out to them from the shore, to come and fish for men. But now he’s gone, it seems, the adventure come somehow to a close. Time to get back to work. Time to make a living. Time to catch a few fish. Time to get back to normal. They get a boat, and go out onto the lake, but the fish are nowhere to be found, and now the disciples sit in the boat, the early morning sun dazzling their eyes. They are tired, hungry, disappointed. Just like before. Just like always. Everything is back to normal.

Or is it?

Cast your mind back to the Emmaus road once more, to Cleopas and the other fellow, walking with the stranger they do not yet recognise, finally reaching the outskirts of Emmaus, and just as they take the off-ramp they notice that the stranger is staying in the express path, and they ask him to share supper with them, it’s the least they could do, and after all the sun will soon be down, and you know how it is at night, and they know a nice spot, and he says “Sure.”

So they find their way to a cosy inn, and it’s crowded with travelers leaving Jerusalem after the holiday, but a bribe gets them a seat and eventually a waiter and eventually still a loaf of bread and a jug of wine. And the stranger is given the honour of giving thanks to God, and he takes the bread in his hands, and he tears it, and says “Blessed art thou Lord our God King of the Universe,”

***...and as he says it... and as he says it... it is him, it is him, it is him! It is Jesus, it is Jesus, and he is alive, alive, alive.***

And as soon as he is there he is gone from their sight, but they have seen him, they know him, and they leap up from the table and out the door and the miles fly under their feet, as they rush their way through the rabbit warren of streets of old Jerusalem, as they fall up the stairs and pound on the door and burst into the room scaring the eleven gathered disciples out of their apostolic skins with cries of “He’s Alive! He’s alive! We have seen him! He’s alive!”

And once they are calmed by the others and given a chair and a drink, they catch their breath, still laughing and crying and shaking their heads in the wonder of it all. “Everything’s changed,” they told the others. “At last there’s hope, at last there’s a chance, at last there’s something other than brute force and

disappointment and heartache and death. Now everything's changed. Now everything's better. Nothing will ever be the same again. He's alive. He's alive!" That's the New Normal. He's alive. Hope, peace, joy – alive. Now nothing will ever be just 'normal' again.

Back to Galilee, weeks later, back to the boat, where Peter, nets empty, temper raw, squinting at the shore, sees a man lighting a fire. "Catch anything?" The voice floats over the quiet water. "Try the other side of the boat."

Peter considers the kind of salty reply for which he was famous, but an elbow in the ribs from his brother makes him reconsider. Nonetheless, with nothing to lose, and with at least one of them thinking there's something familiar about that guy on the beach, they give the net a mighty toss, and from the deep, cold waters a great school of fish arises and thrashes about, as the net threatens to rip under the strain. A lot of fish. 153, says John, remembering it all with a smile. They row ashore.

Smell the breeze off the water, tinged with the early morning aroma of a barbecue, some fresh fish simmering away. The disciples, reclined on the beach around the fire, eating, sharing both food and stories, waiting for some special words from the other sitting in their midst, who is poking a stick into the fire, checking the fish, sand on his resurrected feet: Turns out, the guy on the beach? It is the Lord. It is the Lord. It is Jesus, and he's alive, alive, alive, and Easter isn't over after all, because he's alive, and that means everything is changed. He's alive, and so Easter will never end. He's alive, and at last there's hope, at last there's a chance, at last there's something other than brute force and disappointment and heartache and death. Now everything's changed. Now everything's better. Now nothing will ever be just 'normal' again. This is the New Normal. Hope, peace, joy – alive.

For the disciples, for the friends, for the family and the followers of Jesus, nothing was ever just 'normal' again. For the disciples, for the friends, for the family and the followers of Jesus, Easter wasn't over after all, because he's alive, and that means everything is changed. He's alive, and so Easter will never end. That's the New Normal.

And we – you, me – we are the disciples, the friends, the family and the followers of Jesus now. Which means that for us, too, there is a New Normal. For us, too, everything is changed. For us, too, he's alive, and there's hope, there's a chance, there's something other than brute force and disappointment and heartache and pandemic and death. Now everything's changed. Now everything's better. Hope, peace, joy – alive. Now nothing will ever be just 'normal' again.

In the 14 days between Easter Sunday and today, you've encountered God, experienced God, lived in the light of the Risen Lord. Your story is the story of one who has walked with Jesus on your Emmaus road, whether or not you realized it

was Him. Your story is the story of going back to what you know, and in the midst of your day, coming to the realization that Jesus is there with you, every bit as much as in that Emmaus tavern, every bit as much as he was on the beach with the disciples, calling to them to “try the other side.” To do what they’ve always done – what you’ve always done – but to do it in a new way.

Easter Sunday may be past, but Easter is not over, is never over, for Christ is risen – he is risen indeed! – and in his rising has given us new hope, new hearts, new lives. It is but two Sundays past, and if the light of the joy has dimmed in our eyes, it is because, like the walkers to Emmaus, Jesus walks with us, but somehow we just don’t realise it; like the fisherman with empty nets, he is there for us to see, there in plain view, but we just don’t glimpse it is him. Somehow, they – we – had ceased to expect him. And yet, there he was. There he is. It was Jesus. It is him. And he’s alive.

For the followers of Jesus – for us – every day is Easter, for every day we rise to new life, by the power of God within. That is the Good News which we received, in which we stand, though which we are being saved. Never let its light dim in your heart. Keep expecting Jesus, working with and through you, walking beside you, every step of the way. Glimpse him with the eyes of faith, and live the New Normal together with him, a normal in which there’s hope, there’s a chance, there’s something other than brute force and disappointment and heartache and pandemic and death.

Easter over? Never. Back to normal? No. Not for you. Not for me. Not for the friends, the family and the followers of Jesus. Now there’s a New Normal. For you, for me, every time the sun rises, it’s a New Normal. Every time the sun rises, it’s Easter, and the Risen Lord is with us once again. Jesus – alive! Hope, peace, joy – alive. You – me – alive! Thanks be to God! Amen.