

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**Easter 3 – Emmaus
Luke 24.13-35**

**18 April 2021
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Burning Hearts and Open Eyes”

She had grown up in the church, she had felt close to God, and she had felt called to be a pastor. She had finished seminary, and was now on internship, but it was not proving to be an easy road.

The first challenge was that somewhere along the line in seminary she had lost her faith. She had begun to see that all she had been taught about God was not rational or reasonable. Belief in God could not stand up in the face of science.

There were times she wondered whether she should really continue down this road towards becoming a pastor, given her lack of faith in God, but she had already committed so much time and money to this goal, it seemed it was too late to back out, and there was really no other vocation that attracted her.

And even though she didn't believe in God, she still believed in the Church. She loved its liturgy, and hymnody, and theology of grace. She loved the music and the art and the beauty of the ancient ritual. She believed that people needed a sense of community. And she knew that the church could accomplish so much more in the world as a community than individuals could on their own.

The second challenge was more difficult to overcome. Her supervising pastor for internship had turned out not to be a very good one. At first she had thought that the problems in the relationship were her fault, but her Clinical Pastoral Education group & supervisor had made it clear that it was the pastor who was the problem. They explained that he was acting like alcoholics sometimes act, needing total control, blaming others for his struggles, prone to fits of rage, responding in ways no one could ever predict. You never knew what normal thing you might do that might set him off and cause him to go on the attack.

In addition to her CPE group and supervisor, she was also receiving support from another pastor – someone who had left the ministry but was now a member of her congregation. He spent hours working with her – talking, listening, sharing. He went out of his way to ask her opinions and compliment her work. And whenever she would get discouraged or depressed, he would be there to listen to her and lift her spirits. For many months this pastor ministered to her in her loneliness, depression and despair.

The latest conflict with the pastor had – as usual – come out of nowhere.
The worship and education committees had been charged by Council to work together to celebrate Easter in some new, fresh way that would be especially meaningful to children and youth and young families.
They had met and brainstormed all kinds of ideas and one in particular had captured their imaginations.
They would order special balloons that were decorated with a butterfly, the symbol of the resurrection, and rent a helium tank – & use it to turn limp lifeless things into things that symbolized life, filled with the very air, wind, breath of God that would make them soar!
They were all so excited; they couldn't wait to get to work in preparation!

As she shared with the pastor what they had come up with, he interrupted and said, "No! You can't do that! We will not have balloons in church!"
She was dumbfounded. "Why not?" she asked.
"It's not appropriate. It's silly. It's sacrilegious."
"But everyone on the 2 committees decided. They're excited. They can't wait."
"Tell them, 'No. They can't do it!'"
"But we can't give them a job, have them do it, & then throw their efforts away", she insisted.
He considered a long while and finally said, "If they insist, you can have the balloons in the parish hall during coffee hour."

She and the others were so disappointed – they felt like they'd been fully inflated balloons and then had had pins stuck in them. But they did what they were asked and tried to make the best of the situation. And even though they couldn't have them in church, they ended up having a simply delightful coffee hour on Easter Sunday with the room absolutely full of brightly colored balloons.

It had been so delightful, in fact, that the whole next day she was still thinking about those balloons. She couldn't get them out of her mind; she couldn't think about anything else. It was weird! Finally, she realized that there must be some reason she kept thinking about them – and then she finally realized what it was: It wasn't the balloons themselves that were important – it was what they symbolized. They were a symbol of what the other pastor had brought into her life – color, fun, laughter, joy, hope, faith, love. And those things together had filled her with new life. She felt like one of those balloons – decorated with a butterfly, the symbol of the resurrection, and filled with a spirit that made her want to soar.

As she was sitting there at her desk, thinking about the balloons and all they had meant, there was a knock at the door. It was her pastor friend, who had come to pick up the helium tank to return it. She told him how much the balloons had meant to her and she thanked him for all his support and care those past months. He smiled, picked up the tank and left.

As she stood up and looked out her window, she saw him lifting the tank into his car
and all of the sudden it was not her friend whom she saw, but the risen Christ!
It was at that moment that her life changed.

As she thought back over those past months, all the conversations she had had with her friend,
all the insights he had shared with her, all the love and support he had given her,
she realized that her heart had been burning within her.

It wasn't just her friend that had been walking with her in her grief and loneliness,
it was the risen Christ – God's own self, incarnate.

And in that moment, she came back to faith,
not a faith that was taught, but a faith that was caught,
a faith born through personal experience.

Did those disciples on the road to Emmaus see the risen Christ?

I believe 100% that they did, because if they hadn't,
the story of Jesus would have died out very soon after his death.

The reason the story didn't die was because people experienced the risen Christ.

Some, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, experienced it right after his resurrection;
some, like Paul, experienced it after Jesus had already ascended into heaven.

And the reason the spiritual, mystical, invisible Church is still alive
is because people are still experiencing the risen Christ today –

AND they are telling others what they have experienced.

If the institutional Church is dying, then it is obvious why:

people are not experiencing the risen Christ & sharing that life-altering news with the world.

Every story I tell you is true.

Sometimes the stories are true literally and sometimes they are true metaphorically,
but they are always true.

But in this case I want to be clear: the story I told you today is true –
in every sense of the word – not just metaphorically, but literally.

And I know it is true because it is my story,

the story of how when I was walking down a lonely road feeling discouraged and despairing,
a stranger showed up and walked with me,

keeping me company, asking questions, sharing insights, eating with me,
supporting me, encouraging me, offering me comfort and hope,
and causing my heart to burn within me.

And then one day, just after the Day of Resurrection,

I suddenly saw not a stranger, not a friend, not a pastor, but the risen Christ.

And now it doesn't matter what science tells me, or what archaeology discovers,
or what anything or anyone else tells me: no one and nothing can shake my faith,
because my faith is based on my own experience and nothing can take that away from me.

And there is nothing more important that to share that news with the world.

That's my job, that's my privilege, and that's my passion –
and that my friends, is our first and foremost mission:

to experience the risen Christ and to share that experience with all the world.

For the greatest news in all the world is: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!