

Third Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2020
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Kyle Wagner
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“The Road to Emmaus, Boulevard of Broken Dreams, we are better than Copy and Paste.”

If you are like me, you most likely watched Friday night’s vigil as Nova Scotia remembered the lives so senselessly lost in the shooting tragedy of last weekend. You most likely shed a tear or two as well. Or your little one might have said, “Daddy, this is so sad,” like my son did. Even though we are Nova Scotia strong, we are broken, and we begin to mend our hearts and souls through our communities, and that includes ours.

I believe today’s gospel can help us navigate this space that we find ourselves in. The story begins with two friends walking to Emmaus. Both individuals are overcome with sadness, loss, and the images of their dear friend’s brutal murder on the Cross. Like many of us, they were talking about recent events, trying to find answers, trying to find comfort. But if one carefully reads the scripture, we notice that they were so caught up in their conversation that they didn’t even recognize Jesus, who was near and walking with them. The two followers are confused and uncertain about what the events of the last few days meant.

Not much is known about Emmaus, but its name is most likely derived through Greek and Latin from the Hebrew word for “warm spring.” How fitting that we are beginning to feel some warmth in nature. Even though not much is known about Emmaus, I am sure that the place was like many communities, including ours, populated with good people and bad, people with stories, people with dreams, people who felt connected and people who were lonely.

But notice that Emmaus was also a smaller community. Early accounts suggest that after his Resurrection, Jesus was seen in Galilee and the larger urban centres. But our story today tells us that Jesus’s presence was felt in all corners of the Kingdom, be it urban or rural as Emmaus was a relatively unknown spot. Today we feel a connection as our community across this Kingdom of Nova Scotia mourns and connects in unique ways, so in our isolation we do not feel separated, but stronger together.

If there is anyone who knows about isolation, it is Julian of Norwich. The mystic and theologian of the Middle Ages wrote on of the earliest surviving book in the English language *Revelations of Divine Love*. Not much is known about Juliana, even their gender. But scholars suggest that she was attached to the geographical area of St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, England. Julian spent many years of her life separated from the outside world, for when she was six, the Black Death a plague arrived in England. Educated by Benedictine nuns, Julian had much time to reflect on the nature of good and evil, sorrow and joy, and the existential questions about God and God’s nature.

At one point, she wrote:

“For I saw no wrath except on man’s side, and He [God] forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love.”

“God is nearer to us than our own soul,”

“Christ did not say, ‘You shall not be perturbed, you shall not be troubled, you shall not be distressed,’ but he said, ‘You shall not be overcome.’”

And finally:

“If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.”

What do we do today when we are in a period of lament and we ask why such brutal acts are committed and why such beautiful lives are to be lost? I’m not sure, or at least I can’t tell you a perfect formula to find the answers you want. There are better scholars and counsellors than me, but I would start on the Road to Emmaus. I would start by talking to my friends, my enemies, my loved ones, just as the those who walked the lonely road to Emmaus did. Talking is necessary, the conversation is essential, getting the thoughts, worries, depressing thoughts, out of one’s head is important. Dare I say that perhaps swearing is important!? My God, My God, why hath you forsaken me?

But as we converse, as we support one another, we also need to listen. Not just with our ears but with our hearts. Remember, that the two friends did not recognize the Lord’s presence amongst them. We, too, should be cautious that we do not forget God’s presence even in these unbearable times. We may not feel God’s company, but I genuinely believe God is there. We remember the scripture from the Gospel of John: “Jesus wept,” where the divine saviour himself grieves as we do as he lost his dear friend Lazarus.

Many clergy often get the question, why would God let this happen? Why do bad things happen to good people? I will answer this for you with my perspective. I don’t know. Now this answer may not be comforting, but I do not know the mind of God, so I will not answer for the Almighty. But I can look to John’s account in the Gospel: “Jesus Wept.” I believe that when we humans abuse, rape, assault, kill, and conduct ourselves in ways that separate us from God, God weeps. God mourns, God is Angry at God’s creation. When we ask, “Why did God let this happen” I believe rebuttal is, “Why did you let this happen?”

What I do know is that my faith and my understanding of humanity is shaped by my understanding of who Jesus Christ is. And that is of a loving God, one who brings us into his warm embrace, as he weeps with us, as he walks with us, even when we don’t recognize that presence. The Philosopher Charles Taylor once said about Christianity that we have moved “from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option.” For me, my faith is my only option in times like this, for at many times we walk a lonely road.

Friday, as I was at my computer, I found myself reading the many articles that tried to convey what had happened in our dear province last weekend. The picture is not fully clear at this time, and I suspect it will not be for awhile. As I was gathering my prayers, I

decided to learn about the lives lost, and so I searched out the names. I found myself weeping as I pulled up the stories, and the names. I couldn't find the names listed all in one place, so I resorted to "copying and pasting" them with the click of my mouse.

I thought this would be a quick and easy task, but after three mouse grabs, I said, "my God these are people, these are 23 people. This exercise is taking longer than I thought." Please know that I am not suggesting that our dear Nova Scotians who have left us are merely a copy and paste. But in this age of social media when we constantly act as a copy and paste society, I think we need to remember that when we copy, or model, or mirror behaviour, and when we paste, or repeat the actions of others, or take the easy way, our actions affect the world. Those who have gone before us serve as a reminder to the loneliness we feel.

My favourite band Green Day has a song that has long spoken to me. It is called "Boulevard of Broken Dreams."¹ The lyrics by Billie Joe Armstrong may speak to how we are feeling now:

*I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's only me, and I walk alone*

*I walk this empty street
On the boulevard of broken dreams
Where the city sleeps
And I'm the only one, and I walk alone*

*I walk alone, I walk alone
I walk alone and I walk a
My shadow's the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me
Till then I walk alone*

*Ah ah ah ah ah
Ah ah ah ah ah*

*I'm walking down the line
That divides me somewhere in my mind
On the border line of the edge
And where I walk alone.*

I think this song can describe our isolation. The empty streets, the city asleep, the broken dreams of many, the feeling of being alone, the shadow that we cast. But notice Armstrong provides a glimmer of hope as he says, "Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me, till

¹ Boulevard of Broken Dreams lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc Songwriters: Michael Pritchard / Frank E. / Iii Wright / Billie Joe Armstrong, 2004.

then I walk alone.” If the Road to Emmaus teaches us anything, it is that we never walk alone, that God is with us, even when we do not feel the presence. We are called not to be a copy and paste society. We are called to be a loving people who embrace one another like we did Friday night as we collectively gathered to listen to one another as we described our grief.

So, let us talk, let us walk, let us listen, let us pray, and let us be reminded of God’s presence and love, as we mourn for our brothers and sisters. AMEN.