

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

The New Testament, like its predecessor, is not a historical record. It is a collection of stories written over a period of time to a specific group of believers. When I or others preach the Gospel here, we are adding to a great body of stories intended to strengthen and enrich our collective faith. The death of Jesus was believed to occur about the year 30. Mark’s Gospel was probably written 40 years later, in 70, Matthew and Luke in the 80s and 90s, and John’s Gospel about 100 or later. To quote one writer, “The New Testament authors, *precisely* as pastors and teachers, bear *witness* indeed to the *same* Christ, but with voices that *differ* as in the harmony of *one* piece of music.”

Each the four writers to the Gospel handles what happens after the crucifixion differently. Please feel free to look at your pew bibles as I compare them:

1. When it was first written, the Gospel of Mark had a very abrupt ending: A young man or perhaps, an angel, dressed in a white robe tells the disciples to that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee. They run away, filled with terror and amazement and then bam!, that’s the end of the story. As you can imagine, this is NOT a very satisfactory or inspiring end to the story. We are left with the disciples chasing a rumor or a ghost; there are no stories of the disciples seeing Jesus again. A subsequent writer applied the first patch, like applying spackle to a hole in the wall. There’s also a longer ending that was created in the early part of the second century that combines some appearances of Jesus with a version of the Great Commission.
2. Matthew’s ending is a bit more sophisticated and includes an appearance of Jesus, and a better version of the Great Commission: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”. The first Congregationalists entered Japan in 1869 to carry out the Great Commission. Yoshioka Sensei is a descendant of this spirit, or echo of their voices 145 years ago. He has been sent by the UCC-J to the U.S. to share the good news to Japanese speakers in our country.
3. Luke has the creative ingenuity to create the story of the Road to Emmaus, another reappearance story, then ends with a story about which Moses will preach on the 28th, the Ascension.
4. John, as the last Gospel of the four in the Bible has the longest ending with two full chapters devoted to what happened after the crucifixion, including the most interesting story of the empty tomb. Chapter 20 ends with the words: Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. That’s a fine final chord to John’s symphony.

5. But somehow that wasn't enough, so someone added Chapter 21, with the Doubting Thomas story, and a few great stories involving fish and lambs. It ends with the line, "there were many other things Jesus did, if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written". If you are feeling critical, you could say this sounds like something a student would write at the end of a final paper when they ran out of time.

As you can hear, with the passage of time after the death of Jesus, the explanations of what happens after the crucifixion get longer and more complex. The more time that passed, the more important it became to convey a sense of Jesus reappearing and his ministry continuing after the crucifixion. We move from "he has gone ahead of you to Galilee" with no reappearance in Mark, to a reappearance story in Matthew, to today's story in Luke, the Road to Emmaus, to John. Each of them "bears witness to the same Christ, but with voices that differ as in the harmony of one piece of music."

Initially, people assumed Jesus would be coming back in the form of the Second Coming relatively soon – as in, their own lifetimes. By the time we get to 70 years after his death, the *only* antidote to growing doubts, about the resurrection or the timing of the Second Coming was to create stories of his reappearances. They become more and more concrete, including Jesus eating food and showing his wounds in John's Gospel. These stories bear witness to Christ and help strengthen our beliefs; they have been important to my faith as well.

Emmaus can also be pronounced "*Emowse*." Those of you that were here after the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, nuclear plant disaster - and in the early years afterwards will remember that UCC-J has a facility called the Emmaus Center in Sendai, Japan. From their home page we read, "Over 140,000 people remain displaced (that's down from 200K but still way too many people to be in housing originally designed for 2-3 years). The Emmaus provided relief for tsunami survivors in the initial stages and still continues to walk with survivors today. The Emmaus Center is dedicated to continuing this work "until the very last person moves out of temporary housing." Let me repeat, "until the very last person moves out of temporary housing"- that's a very long term commitment!

Both the Emmaus story in Luke and the "*Emowse*" story in Sendai, Japan are stories of *accompaniment*. To continue reading, "Many survivors still struggle with memories of the disaster and feel anxious about the future. This is especially true for those with physical difficulties, the elderly, and individuals living with anxiety. Regular visits help to lessen loneliness, anxiety, and other emotional struggles." When visitors, like our prior Nichigo pastor, Sahara Sensei, and members of our congregation went there, they were taught that they were not there to "fix things". Their goal was to accompany, be supportive, and helpful – but not to fix things or lead the survivors – to do so would be to deny their agency and impose upon them. Visitors were taught to walk alongside the survivors or follow them, with respect.

This reminds me of Rev. Deborah Lee's presentation during the April 1st gospel fundraising event for one her projects, the Nueva Esperanza or New Hope Project. Nueva Esperanza focuses on "Accompaniment, Housing, Advocacy & Leadership Development with Newly Arrived Youth & Families." Notice that the first word in this list was accompaniment. Accompaniment meaning to walk alongside the newly arrived persons, to help them navigate and find their own ways through social services, medical care, schools, housing, and when appropriate, the courts.

The City of El Cerrito declared itself to be a sanctuary city just a few weeks ago, joining San Francisco, Oakland, Alameda, Berkeley, Richmond, San Jose and others. We received a call last week from an organization called the El Cerrito Progressives. On Thursday I spoke with a representative who is reaching out to churches in El Cerrito to find out what they are doing or might be interested in doing. I told Rose Takano about our work with GRIP and interest in community outreach and engagement, particularly in ways that create opportunities to engage with or accompany people on their journeys.

Tomorrow night there is a workshop titled, “Learn How to Protect Your Family, Friends, & Workers During Immigration Raids”. They are also supporting “Medicare for All” and involved in discussions about expanding the West County Detention Center jails. Please let me know if you are interested in learning more about this organization; I know I am.

In my own ministry, some of the most rewarding and moving experiences I have had have been accompanying families when a loved one is ill or passes. These give me opportunities to love, understand, and serve people during important and delicate times in their lives. I have spoken to a number of people as they described remembering their loved ones, grieved their losses, and walked with them on the uneven and meandering roads towards new life. I have also seen how many of you have accompanied elderly parents over many years of aging and failing health – yours is a ministry of accompaniment. I am rushing out of here at the end of the service to visit “M”, who is having a “rehoming party” today to help her feel better about her new home in an assisted living facility in Oakland. I’ll rush back for the party.

Jesus reappeared to the disciples, our story tells us, because they needed to reconnect with him. In addition to accompaniment, another important word is to remember.

Not just in the sense of being reminded of past experiences, as the disciples remembered their time with Jesus. The word “remember” can also mean to re-member, to put back together. When I have seen “M” over the past year, one of her greatest sources of sadness has been that, since she can’t drive, she can’t get to church on Sunday. Some members of the Women’s Fellowship are hoping to visit “M”. “M” has some memory challenges, but your visit will also help her re-member, put back together, a sense of who she is as a beloved member of our church. You, in turn, will also remember who you are, as you provide this ministry of accompaniment.

I am sure that one of the reasons that celebrating their 80th birthday party with us this afternoon means a lot to Marilyn and Harlan Head is that members of this church have accompanied them so wonderfully for decades, through both hard challenges and great blessings. We have accompanied them but equally important this day, they have accompanied and led us. They have shared their faith with us through their countless acts of love, sacrifice, and courage.

None of us is perfect, including the Head family. All of us have an occasional rough edge or shortcoming; that’s what makes us good material for God to use. Just think about all the “mistakes” Peter, Paul, and the other disciples made - yet Jesus chose them. When we accompany each other, with all the same blends of weaknesses and strengths, with the same lack and strength of faith as the followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus – we remember *who* we are, we re-member ourselves as disciples, imperfect people called by God to share resurrection stories, not only of Jesus but of our own lives and those we love.

In our story, Jesus did not become real and you and I do not become real and fully alive until “he *took* bread, *blessed* it, *broke* it and *gave* it to them.” The verbs are important: took, blessed, broke, and gave. “He *took* bread, *blessed* it, *broke* it and *gave* it to them.” We who have been broken open, who embrace our vulnerability, will be blessed, when we share the bread and cup.

Good teachers don’t tell people answers, they ask good questions. Hear these questions from Jesus, from John Bell’s song, The Summons as questions Jesus is asking you today:

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Just like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, may each of you suddenly realize that Jesus has been walking beside, and within you.
Amen.

Scripture

Luke 24:13-35

Roslyn: Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, Moses: "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

Roslyn: They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them,

Moses: "What things?"

Roslyn: They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them,

Moses: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

Roslyn: Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures, which Moses could do but won’t do this morning. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Moses: May God add new understanding to our reading, hearing, and living out of this story. Amen.