

April 6 sermon

The followers didn't know who Jesus was, but they insisted he come to their home and share a meal with them. Radical hospitality, and their eyes were opened. Maybe their eyes were opened *because* they welcomed him and shared their bread. St. Luke's process of discernment. To whom are we to offer radical hospitality? How are we to manifest this hospitality? Who needs to be made welcome on Powell Blvd.? In Gresham? How can we really see God? What are we looking for? How is God different from what we expect? Going out on Powell incognito...meeting people...how do we recognize each other? Communion—people gather around altar, give them signs with words about Jesus...how do we affirm that the Church is the body of Christ? Known in our communion? Recognize someone by their cooking, smells of home, Jesus leads us to a deeper recognition.

April 6, 2008

Easter 3A

Luke 24:13-35

Please pray with me. Dear Lord, be good to us; the sea is so wide and our boat is so small. Amen.

Today's sermon is going to be a continuation of my Easter sermon, going a bit deeper, exploring some of the themes, but taking them a step further. I didn't set out to write these two companion sermons, but the Spirit doesn't usually seem to care what I intend! What I've heard again and again, from many of you, from people outside St. Luke's, and from the whisperings of the Spirit, is that St. Luke's is experiencing resurrection. This is what I preached on Easter. There is resurrection here in a big way, after a kind of death in the early 2000s. St. Luke's is growing, and becoming healthier and stronger all the time. The signs are everywhere. Our services are well-attended, we are financially healthy, and we have lots of creative ministries here that support the life of the church. The labyrinth is a beautiful physical symbol of the health and healing of St. Luke's. We are stable. We are so stable. We are maintaining St. Luke's well, and we're beyond fear for survival. Praise God!

But I didn't answer God's call to come to St. Luke's in order to help a congregation maintain itself. Survival is such an important concern when an institution is dying, but we're beyond death now. We are living into the new life God has given us at St. Luke's.

Let me tell you a parable about the church of St. Standstill. St. Standstill had a purpose, and that purpose was maintaining what it had and what it was. St. Standstill wasn't a bad little church, but it was just a little sad, and just a little scared. Scared that things would change. Scared that if they didn't keep themselves afloat, God wouldn't step in and help them out. Scared that they were losing what they had and that they couldn't get it back. St. Standstill's energy was so tied up in maintaining itself that it wasn't trusting the creative power of the Spirit enough to ask questions about what it *could* be, about what God was calling it to be. And the saddest thing about St. Standstill was that they were right—to a point. God was not helping maintain the church because our God is not a God of maintenance. Our God calls us to be so much more than what we are in the present

moment. Our God has a beautiful vision for each of us, and for each church, to live fully into a future God has created.

The end of the parable is that St. Standstill eventually did have to close its doors. Opportunities for new life had come along, but they had all seemed too risky, too different, and requiring too much change for them to feel safe about pursuing them. God didn't leave St. Standstill, but St. Standstill forgot to listen to God.

In our Gospel story today, the risen Jesus finds two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, and he walks with them and talks with them about the scriptures. They keep talking the whole time they walk, and their conversation continues over a meal at the people's house. Our faith is a dynamic faith—a faith of movement. We are constantly moving toward God's vision for us, as Jesus taught his friends on the road while they walked.

Our labyrinth inspires us in prayer through movement. Ian walked the labyrinth for the first time on Good Friday—it was actually his first time to walk any labyrinth. When he was finished, we both talked about it and shared all of the insights we'd both had *praying* while *walking*. Movement opens us in so many new ways to what the Spirit is doing in our lives.

Churches like St. Standstill that are struggling to maintain what they have are forgetting to trust the God of power and motion to fill them with a new vision and provide them with everything they need to fulfill it. The good news is, I haven't heard *anyone* at St. Luke's talk about maintenance. Our congregational vision is already bigger than that. What I hear at St. Luke's are things like, "we want to see more young families," "we could be doing more to serve our community," "we want let the whole community know about the labyrinth and invite them to use it." These are Spirit-filled desires.

As so often happens when a person or institution experiences death, God brings life back with a vengeance. Resurrection. But life is here at St. Luke's, and it's a strong life and a Spirit-led life. This is an exciting time for a new priest to come to a church. My experience of St. Luke's is that it's a place full of energy and momentum—I see my job as channeling that God-force and guiding it into a common purpose. And I have lots of ideas, but I have to be honest: I don't know what that purpose is yet. My prayers and my conversations with you are telling me that something is about to bloom at St. Luke's—something new—but we don't yet know what it is. And we're in this sacred time of waiting and listening until our new vision is revealed to us.

I've asked the vestry to commit to praying daily to discern God's call for St. Luke's. And they have been doing that for two months. And the Spirit is starting to move in us. And now I'd like to ask all of you as well, because I believe when we discern the Spirit's call, we will hear it echo throughout our whole community—it won't be isolated to one person's imagination or another person's dream. I'd like to ask all of you to commit to going to God in prayer every day, whether it's for 2 minutes or 20, and asking God to reveal St. Luke's calling. (hand out magnets) Now God may work differently in you

than in me. But I find that when I bring a question before God, I rarely hear an answer right there in the same sitting. What happens more often is that I continue to bring the question to God throughout the day, over time, and God works my mind to be attuned to the Spirit. I notice things in my daily life that I might not usually think of. Then God's answer will be revealed to me in a comment from another person, or in something I read in a book or the newspaper, or in a picture I see, or in an encounter with someone. So as I continue to pray to discern God's calling for St. Luke's, I'm going to add the prayer that all of our prayers bear fruit, that God will speak to us and through us and give us a focus for our ministry.

Let me return to today's Gospel one more time. The two people walking on the road to Emmaus with Jesus...they see Jesus, and they think he's a stranger. They don't recognize him. He walks with them and they start talking, and they come to Emmaus. When they get to their house, the people don't bless the stranger (Jesus) and wish him well, they insist, they literally *insist*, that he come and eat with them in their home. And what happens? Jesus eats with them and it's only over the meal, during the breaking of the bread, that he is revealed as the Christ.

I think this passage could be the seed of our calling at St. Luke's. I preached on Easter about radical hospitality. Elise Astleford shared her powerful insight that people are hungry to be made welcome. And here in today's gospel, two people who make a stranger welcome find that they have been receiving Christ. I keep asking myself, where is Christ in Gresham? Where is the need that our unique gifts can meet? Where will our deep desire to serve match our community's great need to be served?

I've had several ideas. And I know you have, too, because you've told me about them. What about creating a healing center at St. Luke's? We've been blessed with healing ourselves, and we have the gift of healing in our labyrinth and our healing team, and, hey, we *are* the parish of St. Luke the *Physician*. Or we may be called to develop a Center for Contemplative Spirituality for Gresham. We may discern a great need for ministry to families in our community and start offering a Godly Play program, more Sunday school classes, ministries to parents and children and youth. We may hear a call to turn our land into a growing garden that feeds the hungry in our community with fresh, delicious, nutrient-packed food. We may hear God asking us to build a skate park so Gresham's young skateboarders have a safe and welcoming place to skate. We may find that God is calling us to nurture local artists and our neighbors by turning our building into an art gallery and using our space to serve the community. We may find that a great need here on Powell Blvd. is teaching ESL classes to recent immigrants, or making MAX stations safer, or providing childcare to working parents. I don't know. Yet. What I do know is that God will not let us settle into maintenance mode because God loves us too much. When we listen for the call, and really hear it, we will move into being with the God of movement and transformation who has prepared for us better things than we can ask or imagine. Amen.