

“The Road to Emmaus”
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
April 20, 2025

First Reading Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV) (slightly adapted)

Second Reading The Low Road by Marge Piercy (abridge

Sermon

After Jesus’ execution, the community he had worked so hard to build was a mess. Most of his followers had fled before his death – only a few of the women stayed with Jesus as he died. And they were all demoralized, grieving, publicly denying their association with him, and in despair – “we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they say. But now he was gone – they didn’t know how to be a community without him, and they were afraid for their own lives. They no longer knew what they meant by “we.” And so, they disconnected from one another, and went away, lying low in various places, turning their backs on the community to which they had been so committed only a couple of days before.

Alone you can fight, but they roll over you, said the poet.

And then, something happened, and they regathered – their community resurrected with the courage and strength of purpose to carry a profound, counter-cultural, and dangerous message into the world.

Something happened that changed everything.

What was it that brought about a return to brave community? The stories describe followers who see and speak to Jesus in the flesh after his death, and are emboldened by that experience to build a radical new faith community that preached love and challenged hierarchies and – most improbably – survived.

I suspect it was more complicated than that. But the stories do have something to offer about how the resurrection of community can happen. For in those stories:

It happened when a few people gathered to mourn and tend the body of someone they loved. It happened when those who came together to do that task found a spark of hope and shared it with others. It happened in conversations that make meaning of the past, and it happened in welcoming a stranger on the journey, in the willingness to learn from another, in an invitation to share a meal. It happened as people let go of what they thought they knew, and allowed themselves to encounter a wild new possibility. Resurrection happened as their eyes and hearts opened to the sacred within one another, in an offering of bread.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love

A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.

The resurrection of a people happens – not in a blinding supernatural flash, but in the little moments of commitment, attention to details, humility, welcome, connection, ... protest ... moments when the sacred shows up because we are journeying together with care and love.

Resurrection happens when we recognize the presence of the sacred in those we love and in strangers, and when the difference between the two doesn't matter quite so much.

It happens as one person becomes two, four, six, a hundred. It happens when we say "we" and know who we mean and each day we mean one more.

The story of the road to Emmaus was written down maybe 50 years after Jesus was killed. You can hear the developing Christian theology in it, especially in that line where the author has Jesus say "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" That theological linkage of redemption with suffering and sacrifice went on to become central for many Christians – and it is an expression of reality (suffering and glory are often linked), it's a statement of belief, and – for some - a source of comfort and hope in hard times.

And, that sentence doesn't sit well with me. I don't believe in a deity that wills anyone's suffering, ever. And this linkage has been used over the centuries by powerful people to promote other people's patient acceptance of abuse and oppression. Still, whatever your perspective on this theology, imagine the impact at the time.

One of the early challenges for this community was Jesus' particularly humiliating and painful death. This was not what a great leader does. None of the great kings of old came to an end like that (at least not in the stories that were passed on). If this community and message were to go on, the early Christians needed to deal with this problematic reality. They might have tried to bury it; instead they chose to embrace it – to make it an integral part of their identity and purpose. It wasn't shameful, it was foretold, necessary, critical for Jesus' mission. Others might look down on them for it, but they boldly claimed that piece of who they were. And that choice to claim all of who they were and find meaning in it made that community's resurrection possible.

At some point, a community that wants to thrive needs to own its past and its present reality, even the things it would rather not look at - or that demean its people in their own eyes, or the eyes of others. And it needs to find meaning there.

This is not easy, and that early Christian community seems to have come very close to missing their own resurrection. In the stories of the road to Emmaus, or by the tomb, or anywhere these people encountered Jesus, they don't recognize him at first. Whether you hear that literally or metaphorically, it is easy to miss the sacred when it shows up in our daily lives. They might not have noticed at all, or might have turned away from their new responsibility to carry his radical message into the world. No one would have blamed them for returning to the safety of a more conventional life. And yet, they embraced their own resurrection in all its uncertainty, discomfort and danger. They participated in it. With each other. In community. One act of love and courage at a time.

And perhaps, this Easter ... so do we.

Our world is experiencing a massive upheaval; much has been lost already and we're on a path that leads to more people getting hurt, especially the most vulnerable, and – ultimately – to the rise of tyranny and the death of democracy. Instead of making meaning from the shameful parts of our history, we are increasingly denying them. And those who speak truth to power are increasingly being punished for it, as a warning to us all. It is a scary time, we are at risk of being driven into hiding.

Or

We can be bold enough to come together to carry our message into a world where people in power don't want to hear it.

Both enough to speak truth in face of lies.

To love in a sea of hate.

To claim all of who we are.

and live our purpose, one act of love and courage at a time.

Together.

Resurrection happens when we make it so. We don't know what the future holds, any more than those early followers of Jesus did, but we do know how to do our part – by looking squarely at what has happened and who we are; and by the little acts that bring us together, changing us, strengthening us, reminding us what we mean when we say “we” and finding our way to meaning one more.

Resurrection happens when we gather to care for each other and share our experiences. It happens when we find a spark of hope and share it with others. It happens when we make meaning from the past, when we welcome a stranger, learn from each other, and share a meal. It happens when we allow ourselves to encounter a wild new possibility. It happens as our eyes and hearts open to the sacred within ourselves and another.

it starts, says the poet, when we care ... to act

When the community of Jesus' followers was resurrected, its people didn't know where it was going. But they knew that something important happened when they came together in love. Something that made all sorts of improbable things seem possible. And they figured it out from there.

How will you join the resurrection? What details will you tend? What spark of hope will you share? Who will you journey with? listen to? Learn from? And welcome in? How will you pay attention to the sacred in yourself and others? What revelations await?

The resurrection just might be happening. Because something important still happens when we come together in love. This doesn't mean things will be easier – that's certainly not how it worked out for the early Christians, and it won't in our world either. But it might just give us hope. For Easter is, ultimately, an offering of hope, and a call to make it so.

Happy Easter, Albany.

Amen