

Church of the Resurrection

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Luke 24:13-35

This is a big year for baseball. Lots of changes. The bases are bigger – they kind of look like pizza boxes out there. Pitchers have a limited number of pickoff attempts. The designated hitter is now operational in both leagues. A ghost runner is placed on second base at the start of extra innings to try to move the completion of games along. There is a confusing new rule about infield shifts that I won't even try to explain here.

The biggest change is something called a pitch clock – pitchers and hitters now have limited time between pitches to be ready to pitch or hit, with a ball or a strike being the consequence of undue delay. That means no wandering around the pitcher's mound several times, no exiting the batter's box to loosen and tighten the Velcro on your batting glove.

The point of all of these changes is to increase scoring, and to decrease the length of games, strategies aimed to attract younger fans and more casual fans. The plan seems to be working – more stolen bases, more runs, and, most importantly, shorter games.

Pundit and fan opinion is mixed. I, personally, like some of the changes but detest others, especially the ones that seem to impact the actual strategy of the game. What seems to be the case in everything I read and everything I experience is that there is acknowledgement – sometimes welcome, sometimes grudging – acknowledgement of the need for change, of the need for baseball to adapt to the times, to newer audiences, who want more action, who have shorter attention spans.

I am reminded of the church historian Martin Marty's famous line about the seven last words of the church – we've always done it that way before, or, an alternative version, we've never done it that way before.

I am also reminded of the line in perhaps the greatest movie ever, "Bull Durham." The frustrated manager tells his players: "Baseball is a simple game – you throw the ball, you hit the ball, you catch the ball."

Baseball changes. We adapt. Church changes. We adapt. Church, like baseball, can be a simple game – you worship, you learn, you care, you serve. What it will look like, how it will happen, who will show up, who will lead – all of those things will change. But the basics won't. At least I don't think so. Church, like baseball, might occupy less real estate on the American cultural landscape. There are days when I lament that reality. There are other days when I don't. Church, at its best, has an impact far greater than its statistics might suggest, impact that might

evade metric analytics. But we know. Lives transformed. Grace extended. Hope shared. Justice proclaimed.

Someone exiting should not presume to offer advice, and so I will not do that.

But I will presume to look at this morning's gospel text and see if there are any directional hints about where God is calling you, tomorrow, the next day, and all the days after that.

We continue to gather in the Easter season, liturgically speaking. Theologically speaking, now, every day is lived in the promise of Easter. Every morning is Easter morning. I am not suggesting a re-branding, except that now every church might rename itself Church of the Resurrection.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus has been raised and lots of commotion follows. In a very low-key, abrupt scene change, our attention is redirected. It seems as if Luke doesn't want us to spend too much time on what actually happened at the empty tomb, and more time on how what happened mattered.

Two disciples are walking to Emmaus, a good, long walk. A stranger appears and joins them. The stranger inquires as to the nature of the conversation, and the disciples respond – incredulously – wondering how the stranger could not know what had happened in Jerusalem over the past few days. And they tell him. They tell the stranger, the inquirer, they tell Jesus...about Jesus. They recount all that had happened.

But notice the conversation. There is still doubt in the disciples' voices. "We had hoped that he was the one." We had hoped. They are yet unsure. They heard the women's report about the empty tomb, but how on earth could they believe a few women?

At that point, the stranger, still unidentified, becomes frustrated, and he tells them the story, the full sweep of scripture. It must have been extraordinary. They get to the village. The stranger prepares to move on, but the disciples beg him to stay. He stays. He breaks bread, a kind of communion revisited. They recognize who he is. He vanishes. They debrief, trying to do a little rationalization. Now they believe.

There are hints, suggested movements for us as a church, a church of the resurrection, for you as a congregation, as you move ahead.

First – the gathering. Notice that even in their fear, the disciples gather. They congregate. They cling to one another in the face of doubt and uncertainty, *and* in hope and joy. That's what the church does. That's what it is called to continue to do.

But to use the baseball imagery – it might look different. It *needs* to look different. Sometimes the gathering will be here, in this place, in this beautiful sanctuary or the rooms that surround it. Sometimes the gathering will happen on Zoom. That is our future and it has many, many benefits. Sometimes you will gather away from this place – at Campbell's Place, at a ballgame, at a worksite. But we will gather, gather to connect, to engage, to care, to build relationships.

Think about what that will look like for you, and think what that will look like for those not yet a part of this community.

Think more expansively about this gathering, as the first disciples clumsily did. It took them a while to recognize and acknowledge the women and their leadership. Let's not take so long – whether our LGBTQIA+ siblings, siblings of color or varying economic backgrounds, diverse theological perspectives, long timers and newcomers.

Second – tell the story. It's not a hymn I know that well, and we won't sing it today, but think of that old chestnut "I love to tell the story." Please, love to tell the story. First the disciples told the story to Jesus, at that point still the unidentified stranger. Then Jesus told the story to the disciples. I would call it evangelism if that weren't such a scary word for us. But we can find ways. Tell the story, first to one another. Remind yourselves why you are here. Love. Compassion. Inspiration. Hope. Joy. Comfort. Grace. Tell the story to yourselves, and then be so bold as to tell it to others. Share what happens here and invite people in. Telling the story can look like all sorts of things, and sometimes you can even tell it without using church-y language. Tell the story.

Finally – break bread. That's what they did. Having shared a last meal with him just a few days prior, they rehearsed that meal on Easter evening. Break bread. That's what we will do when we gather for gourmet spaghetti this evening. But it's also what happens when we expand that image just a bit – making PB and J for Face to Face, cooking ziti, sharing food for Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry.

Breaking bread – feeding and being fed – takes on many forms. It is at the heart of our Matthew 25 commitment: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." This is real food we are talking about, food that fills empty stomachs, but also the food of compassion that seeks to eradicate poverty and the food of justice that seeks to dismantle structural racism. Break bread. Break bread around this communion table, certainly. But don't stop there.

Thanks to Rebecca Thornburgh, we found a somewhat historical photo of the church to put on the bulletin cover. 1949, as the church was growing and therefore moving from its location down Germantown Avenue. If you look at the steeple as you go home today, you will notice cell tower boxes, which our 1949 forbears could hardly imagine. You should also know that those boxes have been obsolescent for a while now. They soon will be gone as newer, smaller cell equipment is housed inside that very steeple.

The photo is a reminder that the church – the building itself and all that happens within and beyond it – is always a work in progress. Like the Golden Gate Bridge, you finish painting it and it's time to start again. And that's good. One of my favorite Presbyterian taglines – and my only Latin of the day – goes like this: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. The church reformed and always being reformed. *Being* reformed, the subject of reform.

In his famous “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” T.S. Eliot wrote “And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.” Always being restored.

It is said that a minister, if they, she or he is lucky, has 2 or 3 good sermons in them, and preaches variations of them for their entire ministry. I would be grateful for one, on some days. But when I think about it, mine would go something like this: **reconciliation, vocation, stewardship**. If anything this morning, this is a stewardship sermon, a reminder that we have been given an extraordinary gift – resurrection – and an extraordinary vehicle – the church – with which to cultivate that gift.

Poet Mary Oliver asks: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” That is a question for each of us. But it’s also a question for the church. We know the trends, the statistical decline, the loss of influence of the church in society, Sunday morning sports, the still unknown full impact of COVID. We know that.

But remember, we have resurrection on our side. Resurrection. Football coach Marv Levy asked “where else would you rather be than right here and right now.” Where else? Bruce Springsteen sings “Glory days, don’t let ‘em pass you by.” Don’t.

Gather. Tell the story. Break bread. Leadership matters. Of course it does. But at the end of the day, and at each new day’s beginning, what matters most is this: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.