What Things?

Grace and peace to you from the risen Christ. I am grateful to Pastor Jen for this chance preach to our community. Even more, I am grateful to all of you for the love and hospitality you've given to Kit and me in our first year in the Twin Cities. You are literally the answer to our prayers for new friends, real community, and meaningful ways to serve.

The church celebrates the season for Easter for 7 weeks – 50 days. We have time to marinate in the stories of Christ's resurrection and the ripple effects. It takes time for a resurrection perspective to sink in. A season, a period of weeks and months can cause meaningful change. We can all agree on that now, right? Not too long ago we worried about how difficult it was to change habits, to change the world around us. And now look at us. Look at the impact of an invisible virus making its way around the world, respecting no borders and defying our explanations and efforts to contain, challenging our beliefs about what and who is important. We didn't ask for this, but we are changing in ways we don't even realize yet.

Luke's gospel gives us a story about change for two of Jesus followers – change in understanding, change of heart, change in direction. In this story, however, the one making the change happen was not the disciples, but Jesus the risen Christ.

Two disciples (not part of the eleven, but part of the larger group that was following Jesus) are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Luke tells us it was about seven miles, or a just a few hours walk.

They were heading away from Jerusalem to Emmaus. We don't know why they were going to Emmaus, but we can reflect on why they might be leaving Jerusalem. In one week they went from jubilation and high hopes of Palm Sunday, to tragedy and horror of their lord's death on a cross. One of their group had betrayed Jesus, one had denied him. Their religious leaders had conspired with Rome to have him killed – crucified. Everyone was afraid, hiding out. The holy city of Jerusalem was a place that made them think of loss, pain, violence. Chaos. Gotta get away.

Yet as they walked they couldn't stop talking about it, turning over and over again the events that had happened. It didn't make any sense, but they couldn't help themselves.

These disciples were living in a world where resurrection had already happened. Jesus Christ was risen and yet they struggled to make sense out of what they had seen and heard. Sound familiar? Perhaps we can imagine ourselves also on this walk.

Jesus comes alongside them but they are kept from recognizing him. Let's call him "Stranger Jesus." Stranger Jesus asks what they are talking about, *"What things?"* And the disciples pour out their story. "We had hoped this Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. But our leaders handed him over to be killed. Not only that, it's been three days so he is certainly dead. Moreover, we are hearing stories about an empty tomb and an angel! What things?!? Are you kidding me?

I wonder how we might we answer Stranger Jesus' question – "What things?" Like the disciples, we might pour out our jumbled thoughts. Our confusion, our feelings, our doubts, our disappointments. We had hoped things would work out differently. We had hoped for justice, for cured cancer, We had hoped for baseball, camping trips, for comfort and abundance, for a spring and summer of jubilation and celebration. We had hoped for freedom and peace. But we have seen an awful lot of suffering and confusion, and we want to look away. Moreover, it's been 2000 years since the first Easter. "What things?" Each of us could answer this question. And Jesus listens patiently.

But then Stranger Jesus leans in and grabs their attention showing them that what they see and hear is indeed part of God's story, part of God's very being. *"How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe what the prophets say."* Jesus is not judging them as much as aching for them to see how he sees, for their hearts to believe what he knows. And so Jesus teaches them how it was all necessary. Not like some divine to-do list; it was necessary because this is who God is and what God does.

Moses tells the story of God's compassion for the oppressed, God's deliverance, and God's desire for a new way to live in relationship. That's the covenant. But over and over, Moses and the prophets tell the story of people's weakness, God's heartbreak and God's saving action. That's what God does. That's who God is. It

was necessary for God to become human and bring the reign of God into the world – to heal the sick, make the blind see, to bring good news to the captives. But God loves so much that God suffers along with creation. It was necessary for the servant God to suffer with the groaning of the people. That's who God is. That's what God does. It was necessary that Christ be broken along with the broken, must feel the broken relationship with God and the world to the very bottom – to the shame of death on a cross. Only then does resurrection happen. Only then does glory, the power and presence of God, come into focus. But it does come. Resurrection does come, God's glory is revealed. This too is who God is and what God does.

Last year, as part of a seminary class on evangelism, I hosted a "Doubters dinner". The idea is to gather 10 or so people, a mixture of believers and unbelievers. We ate dinner, and then asked them to write down on a slip of paper a doubt, a question they have about God, faith, religion, the church, and put them in a basket. The slips of paper are anonymous. The questions are familiar ones – "If God is so powerful, how can God let awful things happen?" "How do we know what God's plan is?" "Is it really true that Christ is the only way to heaven and all the other religions are false?" "Is Christ really going to come back? Why is it taking so long?"

One by one we take a question out and we discuss – not trying to definitely answer the question. Most of them don't have definitive answers. The point is to honor the question and the doubter, for the group to listen to one another's questions and sit together while the Spirit does the work. And the Spirit does work. That's what God does. One of the people at our table was a man who for years doubted the whole thing about Jesus, even as he was married to the most faithful of church ladies. I know that our open discussion of doubts made room for him at our table and the Spirit had room to work in his heart as well.

On the road to Emmaus, the disciples invite Stranger Jesus to dinner, to their doubter's dinner to continue the conversation. And there, in the breaking of the bread, Stranger Jesus is revealed as **Risen Jesus**. **The Risen Christ.** It wasn't their insight or their intense study. It wasn't a spiritual discipline or seminary class. It seems that the only thing the two disciples did was 1) be open to talking deeply with a stranger and 2) showing hospitality. We can't do anything to make ourselves believe more, to have faith enough to see the risen Christ in front of us.

This is the Holy Spirit's work. As Luther says, "I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him." Any faith we have is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Given to us for free, often when we least expect it. On the road away from the last place we hoped in God and had our heart broken.

But now the disciples' broken hearts burn with the Spirit's fire. "Didn't our hearts burn as he opened the scriptures to us?" And the disciple's response is to get up and return to the scene and tell their God story. Jesus is alive and on the move, sometimes looking like a stranger or like you and me. Coming alongside the lost, listening, tending to the broken hearts, and giving them fire to carry on in faith. That's who God is. That's what God does.

Close with this prayer….

Jesus, come alongside us when we turn away from the places that disappoint us and people who remind us of all the bad that is in and around us. Give us hearts that are open to you walking with us wherever we go.

Jesus, listen patiently to us as we pour out our hopes, our doubts, our confusion.

Jesus, teach us. Help our hearts burn with a fresh belief in God's desire for this world and its people, in God's compassion for all the places it is broken. Help us grasp the extent of God's love.

Jesus, open our eyes to see you, if only for an instant, in the breaking of the bread and in the face of a Stranger.

Jesus, light our hearts on fire with your Spirit that we would jump at the chance to tell someone that we have seen you.

Amen