

*Jonah 2: 1-9*

*Luke 24: 13-35*

Christ is risen, and this week our journey through the Easter season continues. If you're a diehard follower of the lectionary cycle you'll know that this Sunday, the first Sunday after Easter, is when we typically tell the story of Thomas meeting Jesus after the resurrection and having a few questions and a little bit of healthy skepticism about what is going on. It fits well with the other occasion we're recognizing this Sunday as we welcome this year's class of confirmation students into membership at the 9:30 service. Healthy questions, maybe a few doubts, a little bit of hesitancy, but through it all an earnest desire to try to follow Christ—even through the confusing mystery of it all.

With Megan and Mark preaching Thomas at the 9:30 service, though, I decided to go a little rogue on the lectionary for this crowd, and dive into both a predictable Easter story (Jesus on the road to Emmaus) and another story of surprise and uncertainty on a journey: Jonah's prayer from inside the belly of the fish. In both stories, characters don't know the full picture of what might be happening. Jonah probably thinks he is done for—he's praising God, but I imagine deep down he feels confusion and despair, trapped in the darkness, not knowing if or when he will escape this moment of terror. On the road to Emmaus, the travelers encounter a stranger who seems to not know anything about what has been going on. They say to him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" Meanwhile, they are actually the ones who do not fully understand what is taking place, not yet able to see that their new companion on the road is Jesus himself.

This week we gathered with our eighth-grade confirmation class on Wednesday evening as they shared a bit about their faith journeys in presentations to the church Session. And friends, I have to tell you, it was incredible. In this week after Easter, I was feeling a bit weary—too many services, too many rituals, too many hours at church. But gathering on Wednesday night and hearing our eighth graders talk about what faith means to them, as well as having a few of our current elders speak about the ongoing, life-long questions they have struggled with in their own faith journeys—my strength was restored.

I wonder if you can put yourself back in the shoes of being in eighth grade, or new to Christianity, wrestling with questions and uncertainties about what in the world we're doing as people of faith. Maybe it's a place that doesn't feel so far away, I know I find myself in those questions with some regularity. On Wednesday, several of the youth shared that they aren't always sure if God is real, that the stories of the Bible are sometimes strange

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and off-putting, and yet in faith they want to try—to trust God, keep learning more and continue journeying down an unknown road in community. That night I felt tears come to my eyes more than once as our youth spoke about the earnest hope they have, putting one foot in front of another on the road of faith, even while questions and uncertainty sit thickly in the air around them.

That's the gospel right there. That is the Easter hope of Cleopas and his companion, walking down the road to Emmaus, shaken by a week of difficult, traumatic events, trying to process what they have experienced, and still not quite sure what is going on until Jesus makes himself known through the breaking of bread. Questions. Uncertainty. And God showing up in surprising ways. Something similar happens in Jonah's story, where a man is called by God to bring a difficult message to the people of Nineveh, becomes frightened and tries to run away, only to be tossed in the sea, swallowed by a fish and called back into the faithful task at hand. Jonah has doubts upon doubts, and yet, in the belly of the fish he cries out with the prayer you heard Sharon read, saying "O Lord My God, as my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you." Despite the way this story is sometimes told, Jonah's doubts aren't his downfall, they're just one moment on the winding journey he takes to answer God's call. Jonah's witness gives me hope for those of us who need a few extra nudges from God, or a few more reminders that the difficult path might be the correct one.

We learn the most about God in the midst of those moments of uncertainty—when the questions linger, the fears fill the air, and we're still not quite sure what to make of strange happenings around us. Our faith is filled with mystery, and yet we are often quick to dismiss it for clear answers and confident apologetics. But our confirmation students teach it to us well—amid the doubts, amid the questions, we trust that it will be enough to just keep giving it our best try, continuing down the road and trusting that God is traveling with us.

Reflecting with our confirmands on Wednesday, I found myself thinking more about what I gain in faith from my doubts and questions, the things about Christianity and our world that I struggle to hold together or am afraid to look at too hard for fear that it might all fall apart. I remembered something I had read from the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer about the significance of mystery in faith, and I'll share a bit of it with you now.

Bonhoeffer writes, "The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. [...] Children have open, wide-awake eyes, because they know that they are surrounded by the mystery. They are not yet finished with this world; they still don't know how to struggle along and avoid the mystery, as we [adults] do. We destroy the mystery because we sense that here we reach the boundary of our being, because we want to be lord over everything and have it at our disposal [...]. Living without mystery means knowing nothing of the mystery of our own life, nothing of the mystery of another person, nothing of the mystery of the world; it means passing over our own hidden qualities and those of others and the world. It means remaining on the surface, taking the world seriously only to the extent that it can be calculated and exploited. Living without mystery means not seeing the crucial processes of life at all and even denying them."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*

Sitting with the mystery, letting our doubts be doubts and our questions be questions might just be the most faithful approach we can take. Our confirmation students know that well, and I'm trying to learn from their leadership.

Every year at Easter we declare beautiful, expansive, mind-boggling hope, our spirits lift with the sound of brass and timpani, our noses are encouraged by the sweet scent of a room full of lilies...and every year we then continue down the road into the rest of the Easter season, with questions, confusion, things that we want to believe but might sometimes have trouble arriving at. Before Jesus reveals himself to the travelers on the Emmaus Road, they are also in a post-Easter rut. They've heard the rumors about Christ's resurrection, but they can't quite wrap their minds around it. Questions linger. I imagine it's hard to even give themselves permission to believe the strange mysteries they are hearing about.

With questions and doubts thick in the air, Cleopas and his companion travel forward, and before long, when Jesus breaks bread before them, they recognize that Christ was with them all along. When Jonah sits in the belly of the fish and cries out this prayer of thanksgiving, he recognizes God is there, calling him on to the next things on his journey, faithfully joining him in the road of uncertainty.

As I look at our confirmation students, young folks already navigating so much loss, confusion, change, and loneliness, I'm inspired by the faith that calls them to keep asking questions even when a more cynical answer might be easier to grasp. When our confirmation students can name that they have questions and things that don't quite line up correctly in their minds, but when they still choose to participate in this community and do their best, I have hope that together we can keep journeying through the mystery of it all.

Every moment of our journey with God is an act of faith. When you feel frightened and inadequate, when you worry that you don't have the skills to meet someone in crisis with the right kind of love, when you wonder what in the world we're even doing gathering in this community each week—God meets you on the road and invites you to simply try. That's enough.