

FPCU April 19, 2026 Third Sunday in Easter Rev. Dr. Tina Blair

The Stranger Among Us

Text: Luke 24:13-35

This last week a few hundred of us gathered at a conference at a Claremont Lutheran church, in memory of German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor who refused to say that Hitler had the final say about the Christian church. Only Jesus Christ does, he wrote-- and eventually was imprisoned and killed for plotting against Hitler. The keynote speaker for this conference was Rick Steves, who joined us live from his home in Seattle via Zoom. Several themes emerged out of his love for travel – which clearly went far deeper than creating informative and useful travel books. For Steves, travel puts you in touch with history and other cultures, and this knowledge helps you understand and analyze what is happening in the world today, so that you can be an informed citizen working for democracy and its ideals. It allows us to step back, and see our nation and our democracy in new ways. Secondly, for Steves, a good and faithful, life-long Lutheran, travel is a spiritual experience. When we visit with local families in other countries, we learn that they too are our neighbor. Our neighbors, he said, are not simply the people across the street, or in our town, or even in our own country. They are the children hungry in war-torn countries, the Ukrainians bombed in their homes, the starving in Sudan, and so forth. His talk was a reminder of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, that whenever you “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, and welcome the stranger in your land,” you are caring for him, Jesus, personally.

Notice that Jesus, in his list of people to help, includes “the stranger,” or “the alien.” Jews have always been very aware that they too have been aliens in a foreign land and have lamented that fact (as in Ps. 137). In fact, Jesus himself was an alien in a foreign land when his parents, Mary and Joseph, had to flee with him for refuge in Egypt when Herod decided to kill all the male babies in his age range.

This story did not seem real to me until I traveled to Egypt a few years ago. We spent half a day in the ancient Coptic Christian section of Cairo and were led by our guide to the church built over the well by which Mary, Joseph and Jesus hid, fleeing King Harod's soldiers. How proud the Egyptians are and reverent about this! They gave refuge to Christ himself! We descended to the well, an open pool now underground, and meditated on this event, in which the former slave-owners of the Hebrews, had now become the saviors of the Savior. It was incredibly moving and real.

The theme of encounters with “the stranger” runs throughout the Bible. Abraham and Sarah entertain strangers who turn out to be angels (perhaps) who predict her pregnancy. Jacob wrestles with a stranger, who seems to represent the spirit of God, and earns a blessing and a new name, Israel. And so on.... Look for those stories in the Bible.

Notice that in these stories, God sends the stranger to God’s chosen: it’s the same effect as traveling – in reverse. The stranger often makes clear the history, the context, of the situation, so that it can be seen more clearly. And the stranger also often brings a blessing from God, a spiritual insight, and a message, a word from God.

Today, we hear another story about a stranger, a stranger who joins the disciples on the road to the town of Emmaus -- Cleopas and friend or Cleopas and wife, two faithful disciples. Let’s think back to the Sunday after the crucifixion and put ourselves in their place:

These disciples are walking home, lost in the crowd of pilgrims exiting Jerusalem after the Passover. They are scared, defeated, depressed, despairing. The man they believed to be the Messiah, the power of God himself, is dead. They so passionately believed in this man, this rabbi from Nazareth, that they gave up their livelihood to follow him and support him. They have walked the hills of upper Galilee and have broken bread on the shores of the Sea with him; they have trekked the weary miles up to Jerusalem with him; and they have watched him die. Nothing has meaning anymore; they are going home to be jeered at for being crazy enough to follow this man. But it doesn’t matter; life has no meaning if such a man could die. From now on, they will let others act and not let themselves get hurt so much ever again.

When the stranger overtakes them on the road, they expect him to pass by with the rest of the bustling crowd. But he overhears their conversation and starts questioning them. This man must truly be a stranger to not know what happened in Jerusalem this Passover! It seems silly to tell the story: how could a stranger understand the dashed hopes and the deep despair in which they are now plunged?

But the stranger starts opening up history to them, God’s plan seen throughout the scriptures. He shows them the meaning of verses in the Torah which they had never thought of in that way; pointing out the oracles of the great prophets. They feel themselves drawn in, sparked with new life and new passion. Their hearts burn with longing, and so when they arrive in the village, they beg him to join their humble supper. As they sit at the table, he takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it. Their breath catches in their throats and they freeze in place; time stands still – suspended, an eternal moment

that stretches out forever – for they realize that it is He – the beloved rabbi and Teacher; he, who was dead! He is here, alive, with them! Time stands still.... and as they are about to shout with joy, he disappears.

What is it about the resurrected Jesus? Why is it that the disciples so often fail to know him until he gives some blessing: calling their name, or breaking bread, or greeting them with the blessing of shalom, peace?

What if, what if God still acts through the stranger that we don't recognize? What if the Risen Christ continues to work through the strangers in our midst? And secondly, what if the living Lord expects his Body on earth, the church, to be as he was, a stranger bearing God's good news in word and deed?

This understanding -- that to help the stranger is to help Christ -- was the precept one young priest decided to follow in his life. A journalist told of how a relative of his (the journalist), at age 13 emerged from a Polish concentration camp at the end of the war, in January 1945. She headed for Krakow, hoping to find her mother and sister who, unbeknownst to her, were dead. She was starved down to skin and bones, a walking skeleton, clad in the striped dress of a prisoner, tattooed with a number. She hopped a coal train, but the cold wind cut through her thin dress, and so freezing, she stopped in a train station and huddled in a corner on a hard bench. No one looked at her "a girl in the striped and numbered uniform of a prisoner, late in a terrible war." She was unable to move and close to death. Then a vigorous young man, in robes of a student studying for the priesthood, approached her and asked her what she was doing. She explained that she was trying to get to Krakow to find her parents. He disappeared and brought her hot tea. He disappeared again, returning with bread and cheese. "Try to stand," he said. She tried but could not walk. He carried her, put her on a cattle car bound for Krakow, then climbed in covered her with his cloak, and made a small fire to keep them warm. His name was Karol Wojtyla. He would be ordained a priest the following year. 33 years later, he became Pope John Paul II.

The future pope understood the message of the stranger: when we care for the stranger, we care for Jesus himself. He saw through the skeletal features and saw a child of God. He did not care about the religion of the stranger, who was Jewish; he saw a child of God.

He also understood that to help the stranger is actually a blessing to the one giving help. You see again that this is another key role of strangers: they may become our teachers, a living message to us from the living God.

I think that this realization guided Karol Wojtyla, the future pope. He must have seen his encounter with this Jewish survivor of the death-dealing Nazi concentration camps a message from God, a teaching that eventually the future pope could not ignore. Many

decades later, this man, Pope John Paul II, issued a strong, long-overdue, doctrine-changing, formal apology to Jews for the centuries of anti-Semitism enacted across the centuries in the Christian church, a prejudice which culminated in Nazi death-camps and mass genocide. In tears, visiting Auschwitz and other death camps, the Pope asked pardon for the Shoah, the Holocaust. When you visit Auschwitz, which I did the Master Chorale (and Judy, Bob and Jan) in 2016, you can see the spot, marked with flowers and a plaque, where he prayed. Can we ignore the connection between the rescue of the Jewish stranger in 1945 and the repentance and apology in 2000?

I think we learn a lot for our world from today's scripture passage. Jesus commands us in the parable of the sheep and goats to feed the hungry, help the helpless and welcome the strangers among us. Where in our community and in our world are we, First Presbyterian Church, called to do that and in what ways? We do important mission work in Kenya and in various ways into the community. As you heard in today's "Life of the Church," handing out breakfast bags is one of those ways. We will be having a "Life of the Church" every week. Ask to present your area of ministry one Sunday. Or listen carefully, and see if God is calling you to help out in that area, especially in reaching out to the stranger.

Strangers among us may be very different from us – in look, dress, ways of acting and living, language and so forth – but to help them, or simply listen and learn from them is an act of travel in reverse. It's an act that helps us see ourselves more clearly. It helps us realize that even the stranger is our neighbor whom we are to love as we love ourselves. To help the stranger is to help our Lord Jesus.

Even more important, strangers may bring a blessing or a word from God. They may be the Samaritan that helps to get us healed, showing us how to be a neighbor. They may guide us in paths of greater insight into God's love for this world – such a deep love that God's Son died for it, all of it! They may give us hope with their strength and tenacity and caring. They may teach us new ways of compassion.

We are to act as the Samaritan acted in Jesus' parable, and as Jesus acted on the road to Emmaus, bringing insight and help. We are called to sit down at table with them, and break bread as Jesus did. To welcome the stranger is to break bread together. Just as everyone is invited to gather around this table, the resurrection table, we are called to welcome the stranger to our table, break the bread we share. Then our eyes will be opened, and we will know that Christ is indeed present here, among us! Amen!

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.