

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: He Was There All Along

Lesson: Luke 24:13-35

Good morning, Church! It is such a joy to see all of you. After Easter, my family and I stayed in Atlanta for about five days for a spiritual retreat. It was only five days, but it feels like it has been such a long time since I last saw you—probably because I missed you all so much.

(Slide 1) While I was in Atlanta, I had the opportunity to meet several pastors who have been walking this journey of ministry before me. I was able to listen to their advice and wisdom, and I spent time learning about their attitude toward ministry, their heart for the church, and the mindset of a pastor. And together with them, I also had the chance to visit Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. was baptized, ordained, and served, as well as the house nearby where he was born. I heard that in the past you could go inside, but now you can only see it from the outside.

Also, the pastors I met are currently working at the General Board of Global Ministries, and their building is located in Atlanta. With their guidance, I was able to tour the place and learn more about the direction and vision of GBGM beyond what I had already known.

After returning to Wisconsin, I had four meetings over the past few days, including a Church Conference. And it was really good to see all of you again. And now, here we are already at the Third Sunday of Easter. We often think of Easter as just Easter Sunday, but in fact, we have entered into the season of Easter. During this time, we celebrate and rejoice in the resurrection of Christ, and we share the Easter greeting with one another. So let's do that together. When I say, "Christ is risen," you can say, "Christ is risen indeed." Let's try it.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Yes, Christ is truly risen, and He is always with us. Sometimes the suffering, sorrow, and worries right in front of us cover our eyes and block our ears so that we cannot feel God's presence. But no matter what situation we are in, we must always remember this: God is always with us, and God is on our side.

(Slide 2) As I was preparing this sermon and realized that Luke 24 is today's main passage, I was a little surprised. You may remember that during the Lenten season, we had several Lenten activities. One of them was Lenten Bible Trivia. During that time, we answered everything from dad-joke-style questions to Bible-related questions. And one of the questions that surprised many of you and sparked a lot of discussion was this: "When did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize Jesus?"

Do you know the answer? Those of you who participated, do you remember? At that time, I jokingly said that I might preach on it someday, not knowing that this passage would actually come up—and here we are.

For those who don't know the answer yet, I invite you to listen a little more carefully than usual and try to find it. And for those who already know, I pray that this story will truly speak into your life.

First, I want to ask you: What kind of God is God to you? Based on your life experiences, you probably have many different images—such as a God of love, a God of peace, and so on. Like you, I also have various experiences of God. And one of them is this: God is “a humorous God,” almost like a comedian. Last week, you celebrated Holy Humor Sunday and shared many funny stories and jokes, right? Sometimes God seems to have a wonderful sense of humor. And we can see that even in today's story.

The story begins like this: “Now that same day...” It was Sunday. Around 3 p.m. on Friday, Jesus had been crucified and died. Before sunset, His body was taken down and placed in the tomb. Then, according to the tradition of Israel, the Sabbath began. In Israel, the Sabbath runs from Friday evening to Saturday evening, and because it is to be kept holy, no work is allowed during that time.

Mary and the disciples must have been very unsettled. They must have been deeply sad, and the atmosphere must have been very heavy. It would have been difficult for them to accept that Jesus, whom they had followed and believed in, had died. They probably felt guilt for not being able to protect Him, along with fear and anxiety that they themselves might become targets. They were carrying very complicated emotions. Then, early Sunday morning, word began to spread among the disciples that the women who had visited the tomb had seen angels there and that the tomb was empty. But instead of believing that Jesus had risen, they thought someone had stolen His body, which only increased their worry and concern.

(Slide 3) On that very day, two of the disciples were walking to Emmaus. They were filled with complicated emotions—fear, anxiety—and were likely talking about how they would live from now on. And then, on the road, they encountered Jesus. And they simply began walking with Him, as if nothing were unusual.

Friends, picture this scene in your mind. Imagine it from an observer's point of view. Isn't it almost like a comedy? The disciples are very serious—sad, worried, and afraid because of Jesus' death. And yet, as they are walking, Jesus appears right next to them. They do not recognize Him at all, and they casually walk with Him, talking together. And even though Jesus knows everything, He calmly asks them what they are discussing. And they respond by explaining to Him what happened to Jesus, almost as if to say, “How do you not know this? Everyone knows this!” If this is not a kind of irony, what is?

The distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus was about seven miles. For an adult, that would take about three to four hours to walk. This means they were not just with Jesus for a moment—they walked and talked with Him for three to four hours, and still did not recognize who He was.

When they arrived at the village, it was getting late. Even though they did not know who He was, they had grown somewhat attached to Him after walking together for several hours. Since it would be difficult to travel at night, they invited Him to stay with them. It's almost like saying, "Hey, we don't know who you are, but we've come this far together. It's late, so why don't you stay with us, have dinner, rest, and then leave tomorrow?"

So Jesus went into their home. And He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them. And in that very moment, their eyes were opened, and they finally recognized who it was that had been walking with them, talking with them, and now sitting at the table with them.

(Slide 4) So, friends, "When did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize Jesus?" The answer is: when He broke the bread. Breaking the bread points to the Holy Communion, and through that moment, they fully recognized Jesus.

Friends, in the same way, when we are surrounded by the situations we are facing—difficulties and worries—our eyes can be covered, and it becomes hard for us to recognize God's presence clearly. God is always with us, always beside us, protecting us and watching over us, always wanting to give us good things. But when our eyes are covered, we cannot see or feel Him. In this story as well, the disciples had already seen Jesus on the road and walked with Him for three to four hours, yet they did not recognize Him. Why? Because even though the Son of God was right in front of them, their worries and anxieties covered their eyes.

Let me ask you something. When was Jesus with those two disciples? From the very beginning of the journey. Even though they did not recognize Him, Jesus—God—was with them from the very beginning.

After returning from my retreat, I had four meetings from Wednesday through Friday. Now it is mid-April. Your current pastor has received a new appointment, and the day of departure is approaching. But you have not yet heard news about the new pastor who will come. So naturally, many of you are beginning to feel concerned. Let me say out loud what some of those worries might be: "What if no new pastor comes to our parish? What will we do then?" I've also heard comments like, "We used to be a three-point charge, but now we are a two-point charge. That makes us more attractive to pastors." "We are more attractive now." And during the meeting, I said, "You are already attractive."

Hearing these things made me a little sad. Because within those words, there is already an assumption that you are not attractive as you are.

(Slide 5) So what does Scripture say about this? Let us look at today's reading from 1 Peter chapter 1. Verse 1 says: "Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially..." Friends, the God we believe in does not look at outward appearance, but at the heart. Whether a church is large or small, financially stable or not, a single charge or a three-point charge—these are only the outer shell.

(Slide 6) Let us continue with verses 21–23: "Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."

God loved all of us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world. He died on the cross for us, and on the third day He rose again and appeared to His disciples. Friends, hope—true hope, a bright future—does not come from church buildings or church finances. It comes from Jesus Christ. The situations we face are always changing. But God alone remains unchanging and is always with us.

Even in this very moment, when you are going through difficulties, feeling anxious or afraid—even in the moments when you cannot feel God's presence—God is already with you. He is with all of you.

After the Church Conference on Thursday, I had a brief conversation with the DS in the parking lot. I heard that the Bishop and the Cabinet are sincerely praying and discerning for our parish. I do not know all the details, but it seems that they have a good plan in mind. So, friends, trust in God. Believe that He is already with all of us. In the midst of this uncertainty, I hope you will walk forward with a firm trust in God. A new pastor will come soon, so instead of worrying, I encourage you to begin thinking with hope and excitement about how you will introduce your community to the new pastor and how you will help with this transition.

Friends, even when we cannot see Him, even when we do not recognize Him, Christ is already walking with us. Believing this truth, I pray that we will walk through this season of Easter with hope and expectation. Amen.