

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 29, 2012

Sermon Title: Our Hearts Were Burning

Scripture: Luke 24:13-32

Pastor: Rev, Alida Ward

It was a Friday evening in summertime, a few years back now. There was going to be a big wedding here at the church the next day, so Friday evening was rehearsal time. I was in my office putting together some final notes, and from the window I could see that the cars were pulling up and the bridal party gathering. Time to head over, I thought; I grabbed my notes and headed over here. There was an older couple hovering at the front door, looking out. I didn't recognize them, so I took a guess. "Hi there," I said, "you must be the parents of the groom!" They gave me a kind of 'what's it to you?' look and the dad said "yes", curtly, and went back to staring out the door. O-kaaay, I thought, they are not in a happy place, and I wandered on in to the church.

The bride and groom were there, happily chatting with their friends, I spotted the parents of the bride. A few more people wandered in, looked to me like we'd reached critical mass, so I ambled back to the oh-so-cheerful couple at the door. They were still staring out the door, the dad was scowling and glancing at his watch. "Hey," I said, "I think we're about ready to start." "Well," said the mom, "obviously *not!*" "Why?" I said, "are we missing someone?" The dad rolled his eyes a bit. "I should say so," he said. "Oh." I said, a little nonplussed. We stood there together staring out the door. "This is ridiculous," the mom finally said, in sheer exasperation. She turned to me and said "you obviously work here. Is the minister always this late?" "Oh," I said. "Ah. I *am* the minister." Long pause. The mom swallowed hard. "So, I guess we're all set then," she said. And off we went. Behind me, the dad muttered "how we were supposed to know?" Indeed, how were they really – short blond chick wearing jeans and no clergy collar; I'm not sure I would have seen it.

So you have to imagine now, in this scene that Mike just read to you, two people going through pretty much that exact same experience. The scripture tells us it's this guy named Cleopas and an unnamed companion; it's actually quite possible it was his wife, cause one of Jesus followers was a woman named Mary married to a guy named, yes, Cleopas. So let's just say, Cleopas and his wife Mary, they're on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and they

are not in a good place. Not in a happy place. It is Easter Sunday, but they don't really know it. All they know is that their dear friend, a man they'd followed all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, is dead. All they know is that the man they had staked their lives on has been killed, the man whom they saw teaching and healing and working miracles, he's gone. And yeah, they've heard some crazy story about he's alive, but they know that's insane.

So they're leaving town. Leaving before things get worse, leaving before their grief overwhelms them, maybe leaving because they just can't take it any more. And someone shows up to keep them company. Someone walks and talks with them – and we know who it is, but they, they are clueless. Clueless. Even though this guy seems to know an awful lot about scripture, even though he seems pretty darn knowledgeable about the Messiah, they just don't get it. Until they get it. It's when they sit down to supper with this stranger, and there's just something about the way he breaks the bread and blesses it and gives it to them that makes them realize – holy cow, this is Jesus. And you can just imagine that Cleopas would then mutter to his wife “well, how the heck were we supposed to know?” But the scripture says this actually, it says this beautiful thing. It says that the two of them looked at each other right then and said “of course it was him. Weren't our hearts burning within us?” We should have known he was there. Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us?

I happen to love this gospel story. It says this to me, it says this. It says that a lot of times we don't get it until afterwards. That a lot of times it's in the looking back that we see what was always there, who was always there. It has helped me to understand that the life of faith is in many ways lived backward. The life of faith is lived backward. I mean by that that learning to find Christ in your past is just as important as finding Christ in your present. When those two followers finally get that Jesus is with them, in that aha moment when he breaks bread, in that moment they are suddenly able to look back on their whole journey to that place, their whole walk, and realize that he was walking next to them the entire way. That in their grief and their confusion and their anger and frustration, in their despair and their tears, that all of that was in the presence of Christ. Were not our hearts burning within us? they whisper. Were they not on fire? The life of faith is lived, often, backwards. It may be in the looking back that we see where Christ was present all along.

People often ask me to describe the moment, the one spectacular moment when I knew I believed. When did you find Jesus? I've been asked. What was the moment you came to know the Lord? And I know they're hoping I've got a bright light, angel voices, falling to knees story. And I know those moments happen for people – like, say the Apostle Paul, I know that and honor that. But not for me. For me, it was when I finally looked *backward*. I looked back and saw who had been present with me all along. I recognized the moments when my heart burned within me because of who was there with me.

I looked back and saw that on that day when I was a kid, and I lost someone I loved and went into the woods and cried, I had not been alone. I saw that when I was a freshman in high school and a complete social misfit, the teachers and the really cool senior guy who were kind to me were the presence of Christ. I saw that the girl who lived next door to me in college and said “you know, I could see you as, like, a minister or something,” well, she was actually the voice of Christ. I’ve told her this – it freaked her out a little at first, but she’s good with it now.

Looking back and seeing that, seeing moment after moment like that when my heart burned within me, that for me was the coming to faith. And I think it’s true for all of us The life of faith is lived backward as much as forward, looking at the journey to this place, and recognizing the moments when our hearts were warmed, and knowing who was with us in those moments. It can be as simple as remembering the kind words that made all the difference, and recognizing that those were the words of a loving God. It can mean marveling at the way you came through what you thought you couldn’t get through, and realizing that the power had to come from outside you. It can mean tracing the path that you took to a decision and acknowledging the wisdom that guided your choices. It’s remembering compassion offered unexpectedly, forgiveness given undeservedly, a second chance, a moment of blessing. The times when your heart burned within you.

David and I, as you know, spent time in the hospital this week in a different way than we usually do – not as pastoral visitors, but as sick husband and anxious wife. It’s a scary thing to be in the ER in terrible pain, and not knowing why exactly. And I know I speak for both of us when I saw that the entire time was filled with moments when our hearts burned within us. There is a little irony in that statement, since what brought us in to the ER in the first place was in fact what seemed like the ultimate heartburn from hell. In fact – and I’ll probably be hearing about this for a while – I had suggested that some Alka-Seltzer would probably do the trick.

So, no, just to be clear, I’m not talking about the heartburn. I’m talking about the number of times when we felt our hearts warmed by someone who extended to us surely the touch of Christ, surely the words of Jesus. One example. Not a nurse, not a doctor, though they were wonderful. It was the ‘patient transport’ guy who wheeled David up out of the ER to where he would have his first test. Through the long hallways of the hospital, this young man spoke to us compassionately, reassuringly. Jesus kept his two friends company on a journey filled with grief and confusion – this young man was keeping us company on our journey where David was hurting and I was so worried. And he was so kind. “How long have you had this job?” David asked him. “Oh, I’m not paid,” he said. “I just like to help.” You look back on a moment like that, and you say, *yeah, I know who that was with us.*

In February this year, the book we read for our monthly Book Chat was the book by Laura Hillenbrand which people had been telling me for a year I needed to read. *Unbroken*. I knew enough about it to know that I didn't want to read it. I knew it was the true story of a American, Louie Zamperini, who had been an Olympic hopeful in track, a bright gifted young man. I knew that he had instead been sent to war, and become a bomber pilot. I knew that he'd been shot down over the Pacific during World War II, and drifted on a raft for weeks, near death from dehydration and starvation. And I knew that he'd been found, but not for any happy outcome – that he'd been captured by a Japanese crew and put into an interment camp. I knew that in that camp he'd been tortured to the limits of human endurance. And I'll be honest. I didn't want to read about this. It sounded horrendous. My friends told me that the depictions of what Louie Zamperini endured in that camp were almost too excruciating to get through. So why, I thought, would I want to pick up this book. But when the twentieth – maybe the thirtieth – one of you told me I had to read it, I figured I had to read it. And so as not to wiggle out of it, I announced it as our Book Chat choice. Then I had to read it – I lead the book chats.

And once I read it, I understood why I'd been told to read it. Because it is an Emmaus road story. It is a story of someone who walks an incredibly difficult road, and comes to know, looking back, who it was who walked it with him. He too, Louie Zamperini, looks back on his journey of extraordinary pain and says "but was not my heart burning within me" In a moment which takes place, actually, at a Billy Graham crusade, this is what Louie knows, what he realizes.

I'm quoting here directly from the book: *He had fallen into unbearably cruel worlds, and yet he had borne them And when he turned these memories over in his mind, the only explanation he could find was one in which the impossible was possible ... When he thought of his history what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that had saved him. He was not the worthless, broken forsaken man that his captors had striven to make of him. In a single silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness fell away. He was a new creation. Softly, he wept.*

Did not our hearts burn within us as he walked with us. That was what Louie Zamperini realized, as he looked back. His faith was lived backward, the dots connected. Just like those travelers to Emmaus, their jaws dropping as Jesus broke the bread in front of them , the realization dawning – he was here all along. Were not our hearts burning within us.

We have, each one of us, walked on our own journeys to this point. And what we are asked to do, invited to do, is to look backward. Look back and see every moment where we did not walk alone. Look back and feel again every moment when our hearts were warmed by the presence of Love.

The life of faith is lived as much backward as forward. Look back and see. And live forward in faith.
Amen.