

APPROACHING ALLELUIA
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Legend has it that the great theologian and seminary professor, the Reverend Doctor Shirley Guthrie, used to pull a little stunt on Easter Sunday mornings. At the crack of dawn, just as the first rays of sun were beginning to stream through the clouds, just as the Easter Bunny was hiding her last basket, Dr. Guthrie would crouch toward the telephone, pull out a random number from his rolodex, and giggle into the phone through the wee hours of the morning.

“Hello ..?” the sleep-deprived voices on the other end of the line would ask, when they finally made it to the phone.

Then Dr. Guthrie, in the most emphatic stage whisper he could possibly muster, would gleefully proclaim:

“Jesus is on the loose!”

Jesus is on the loose! The word is spreading throughout Jerusalem, in our Scripture lesson from Luke this morning.

Could it be ..? two of them are wondering together, as they walk the seven long miles to Emmaus.

We can’t believe you haven’t heard, they say to the man who has just joined them on their journey. Isn’t your number in Dr. Guthrie’s rolodex?

Jesus is on the loose! they say. “Some women of our group” astounded us with this word. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them. They went to the tomb early this morning and saw it was empty. Jesus is on the loose! Even Peter says so! He ran to the tomb after the women had told him. He saw the linen cloths in the tomb by themselves, and went home, amazed.

Of course, none of us have actually *seen* Jesus on the loose.

But there *was* this mighty vision of angels sharing the message with the women, in the loudest stage whisper they could possibly muster, as the first rays of sun were beginning to stream through the clouds, and the Easter Bunny was hiding her last basket ...

It is difficult to express in English the hilarity of what is happening in the Greek as Jesus joins these disciples on the road to Emmaus three days after the crucifixion, although the context is anything but funny.

Things are surely bad.

Cleopas and his partner have given up everything to follow Jesus, hoping he was the one to usher in the very reign of God. And now he’s dead. In the worst way possible.

With good reason they have slammed their eyes shut. It’s too much to bear. They’ve taken their pain to their brains in order to cope. If they can just “figure it out,” they seem to think, if they can just make sense of what is happening, maybe this pain will go away. And they can get on with our lives.

The coping strategy makes sense, truth be told. It is what so many of us are doing, including yours truly, six weeks in to our stay at home order: pontificating about the deeper meaning of it all. But the joke becomes that they are so busy trying to make sense of what has happened to Jesus that when Jesus himself shows up they start telling Jesus ... *about Jesus!*

In hindsight, of course, they did know something special was happening. As Jesus journeyed with them out of Jerusalem, their hearts had been burning within them. Just as our hearts are burning within us, even when our sight is fuzzy. Even when we're stuck in our heads. Even when we're trying to sort out the meaning of what is happening to us.

And something special *is* happening now as we grope our way blindly through the first – and please, God, only – global pandemic any of us have faced:

In the span of two weeks you contributed over \$5000 in response to the call to build up the Pastor Discretionary Fund in order to support anyone in our community whose income was threatened by the coronavirus shutdown.

You are helping one another get food ... and medicine ... and i-pads!

You are making videos and you are making masks and you are making do with the task of staying home and doing nothing.

With a 48-hour turnaround, your tech crew figured out how to turn SPC's highly interactive and highly *embodied* service of worship to the internet. And has been working like mad ever since to keep it going.

The truth is, this is a long journey we are on together. We are limping out of our own Jerusalem, even as we stay stuck in our homes. And things really are bad enough to make us slam our eyes shut. Or, almost as dangerous, to rush too quickly to try to "figure things out."

The truth is we do not know how – or when – this journey will end.

What we do know, what we can trust through and through, is that God Is Still With Us on the journey: ready to redeem us, burning in our hearts, giving us guidance through the wisdom of the ages.

And what we do is that just last week a home healthcare aide in a checkout line at the grocery store overheard Cari Simon talking about the cloth mask she was wearing and asked how much Cari was selling them for. The woman needed eight of them, for her clients, and was having trouble finding them.

And of course Cari replied, "Oh, no, they're free!. My church is making them for anyone who needs them."

And the nurse nearly broke down in tears, her heart burning within her. And declared right then and there that God had brought them together in that moment. That Cari was her angel.

And although her words were not quite an exact quote from Shirley Guthrie, the home health aide shouted through the tears, "Alleluia, my friends, Jesus is still on the loose!"

Amen.