

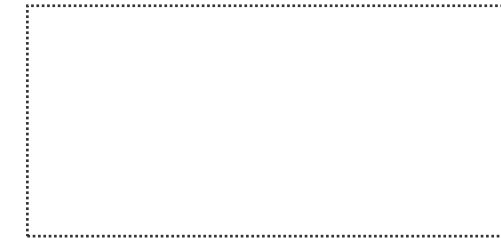


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May 2020

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Pastoral Update

"How are you?"

It is the question I keep asking and the question I keep getting asked. And after a little more than a month of safer-at-home orders followed; I am beginning to wonder how I really am? Truthfully, I am doing better than I expected at this moment in the journey. As the world and our daily living has been reshaped by this pandemic, I am struck by the creativity and adaptability of not only my wife and children, but by my colleagues across thousands of congregations and by everyday people. It is the first time in my life where I can say with confident surprise, "Look how far we have come, without going anywhere!"

I have pondered for some time the direction of this May article. I have struggled with what is most important for me to share with you. Ascension, our faith community, is strong. Without much additional preparation, we entered a new world of worship fully online. It is of course different and difficult to lead worship in a space with no one to reflect the energy and joy of engaging in the communal act of worship. Yet, we have found the opportunity to offer authentic and genuine worship experiences to the world outside the walls of our sanctuary. Some small groups are meeting by video conference, though most of our small groups are staying connected by email, prayer requests and the old school telephone calls. Our ministries with the Hope Center, Food Bank, and Cross continue to extend God's love into our community.

With great sacrifice and love, you tended the building after long years of deferred maintenance and that sacrifice, and love have allowed a usually filled to the brim with activities building to slow down to a trickle of staff to maintain the basics of ministry. No roof is leaking, no siding is peeling off, no HVAC is breaking down, no mice have invaded – all of which I am grateful for in this time when we are doing our very best to keep the important things – the important things. After the closing of the building – we had the building deep cleaned and disinfected by our cleaning company. After the cleaning was complete, Tamie Greenwood, administrator for Joyful Worship and Spiritual Growth, removed every pencil, paper, hymnal, and visitor pad from the sanctuary and bleach-wiped every single item. Chairs and pews were wiped down. Since that cleaning was completed, only minimal worship staff have been in the sanctuary and only two staff people have entered the building. Cloverleaf Preschool, who rents much of the Spiritual Growth Wing, continues to stay open and is limited to the Spiritual Growth Wing. We are cleaning that area twice a week. It is a different feel, to walk through the church and hear no laughter, no studying, no praying, no music. For now, the church is just a shell, waiting for you to return to bring life and joy to the space once again.

Financially, Ascension is also standing strong – thanks to your generous hearts and faithfulness. As you will read later on in our Treasurer's article, giving in March was consistent and our electronic giving increased. I am also grateful to each of you who took the time to mail in your offering or fulfill your yearly pledge earlier in the year to tend the needs of the church. It bears repeating – that I am grateful for your faithfulness to our God and to the ministries entrusted to Ascension during these days.

I will also take time to share with you the incredible reach of our online worship services through Facebook, our website and our YouTube channel. We expected that many people would go online. We did not expect that many of you would share worship on Facebook via your own pages. We are also overwhelmed at the response to our Spanish Worship. Edwin and Sarah Aparicio have been holding their own in planning, preparing, and executing worship from start to finish with video recording as well. We received news that during this pandemic in El Salvador that many people are viewing our Spanish worship. It is an incredible gift and moment of hope that the people of Ascension provide far beyond the borders of the state of Wisconsin. We expect to continue to offer recorded worship through the entire month of May believing that even if the safer-at-home order is lifted, we still may be constrained for the amount of people who will be able to gather at one time. Of course, God might surprise us. The heat might reduce the power and scope of the virus. Time will tell. At this point, Ascension's staff and leadership are asking questions about how we will return to life, knowing that, at least for a time, life will not be as it was before the pandemic arrived at our doors. We are reflecting on questions around communion practices, sharing of the peace, passing the offering plate, greeting at the doors, coffee stations, and a multitude of other ministry items. We are seeking guidance and asking more questions.

In the world of Ascension, there are three Ps for the days ahead: **Proaction, Preparation, Prevention**. Those words are shaping our expected return to worship in the near future. I am grateful for Director of Care Ministries Brenda Lytle and other medical professionals within our congregation for their sage advice in these most strange days of life and ministry.

All that being said, I am also wanting to ask you to continue your prayers for those in our community who are struggling with their health or afraid to leave their homes for their ongoing health conditions that make them more susceptible to the coronavirus. We have members who own their own businesses and are afraid for their futures. Students are missing out on milestone moments including graduations from high school and college. Most importantly, as we have said for so long, social media can only offer so much to each us to connect in relationship. And so I ask for your prayers for our community as we all struggle with the loss of engaged relationships with face-to-face interactions. It will take time to both move forward in our world and process our grief at what has been lost over the past months – both in relationship and in life. In the meantime, I will invite you to remember the words I offered in the first video I posted after the Church Council voted to close the church campus to in-person activities: from John, Chapter 1, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Those words are my never ceasing prayer and reminder as many of us are feeling more and more disconnected.

I am excited to dream about our first Sunday back in worship: to hear your voices lifted up in song; to hear us speak the words of our confession of faith together; to offer you a word of forgiveness in-person; to celebrate the gift of children running up for children's time; to preach to a room full of faces (I will try to keep it under 18 minutes); and to join with my brothers and sisters in the celebration of communion – gathering together once again to offer promise and peace and a tangible sign of God's love and presence in the world.

Until I can see you in church, trust that I am seeing your faces in my prayers.

Pastor Chris

Latino Ministries Update

Switching to online worship has been a lesson in humility and vulnerability for us as worship leaders. Leading worship every Sunday in person to our close-knit congregation of 40 is a different experience from filming a worship service that may have more than 30,000 views. Our biggest challenge has been leading the music. Music is an essential part of worship and some of the most profound moments of worship come from song. We want to continue to create powerful moments through the internet. Our challenge comes from the fact that we are still developing common songs that everyone knows, especially during Lent and Holy Week. Our charter members are all from El Salvador. Some were regular attendees of Lutheran services, some were strong Catholics, and others were Catholics that didn't go to church often. Our service has doubled in attendance since last Holy Week, with many of the new members coming from Mexico. The hymnal is a collection of songs from all Spanish-speaking countries in the world that maybe no one in our congregation has heard before.

For the first week or two of online worship, we had almost no music, because we knew without words, the melodies weren't going to be familiar and were going to have little impact on enhancing anyone's worship experience. We realized we were going to have to start leading singing. This has primarily fallen on Edwin, with some help from our daughters, Marta and Luisa. We've started adding the lyrics on screen. My piano playing skills and Edwin's skills aren't at a level where we would normally volunteer to be so public as a musical act, but we hope that our willingness will remind our virtual congregation that they don't need to be perfect singers to lift their voices in praise. And if I want Edwin to do yardwork outside, I just need to start editing the video and turn up the volume on the computer while he is singing and he will be outside working for hours!

Sarah Aparicio

Administrator for Latino Ministries and Mission Outreach



Music Ministry

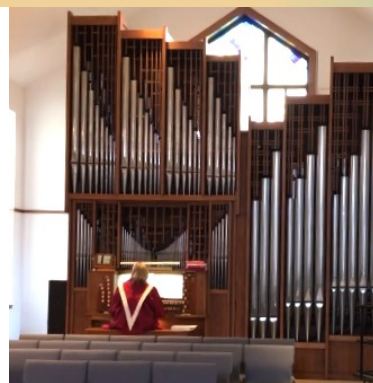
I love playing the organ. The beautiful sight and sounds of the instrument never fail to move me. But one of the things I miss most these days is the joy that comes from hearing voices singing behind me, surrounding me, joining enthusiastically with the unique strains of the instrument in praise to God. Playing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” this Easter was thrilling, as always, and brought the usual tears to my eyes. But this Easter, I know that some of those tears of joy were mingled with sadness at the silence behind me.

As for the other aspects of my job, directing a choir is merely an academic exercise without a handbell ensemble or a choir on the other side of the podium. I greatly miss the beautiful sounds of handbells and voices of all ages, and I especially miss the people who gather together faithfully to make the music. Without them, the music is just black dots on the page.

I eagerly look forward to the day we can once again worship together, and the beautiful sounds of voices raised in praise and adoration return to our sanctuary. Stay safe and prepare to “raise the roof” with joyful singing when next we meet. Until then, a psalm that reminds us of God’s everlasting care for each of us...

*I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 121)*

Vicki Taylor
Director of Music Ministries



BLAST, JOLT & CRASH

While it is truly unfortunate that the current coronavirus pandemic has temporarily thrust a difficult new reality of life upon us, we want to take a moment to remind you just how much your Ascension family misses you. We miss being able to gather together with you each week in classrooms, in music rehearsals, at youth groups, and especially on Sundays for worship. We really miss seeing all your smiling faces each week!

Still, we are hopeful that during this difficult time of separation, you are all doing as well as possible as you try to survive home schooling every day (*Hey, now you know what it’s like for Edwin and I to be in seminary, because we do all our stuff online*), balance working from home or in different ways, and figure out how to stay connected to friends and loved ones. We know these are challenging times for sure, but please know you are not alone in your struggles. We continue to hold you in prayer, trusting that our amazing God is tending your worn and weary hearts and bodies every step of the way.

For the month of May, we plan to continue sending out BLAST Family Pages for families to engage their faith together. Additionally, JOLT & CRASH will continue to meet virtually each week: Thursday nights, 6:30 – 7p, for JOLT; and Sunday nights, 6 – 6:30p, for CRASH. We hope that as we continue to walk into the uncertainty of days ahead, we can stay connected to you and your families by providing resources and opportunities to keep you connected to your faith and each other. Please know how much we miss you, that we continue to pray for you and your loved ones, and we look ahead with hope to a time in the not-too-distant future when we can all be gathered together again in person. Until then, please keep emailing, texting, or calling to stay connected, and be sure to check out the church Facebook page, website, and YouTube channel for worship and other videos. May the peace of our amazing God be with you all.

Tony Acompañado
Director of Faith Formation



Health and Wellness

One of the most difficult parts of being quarantined in our homes over the past month or two is living with fear and stress. We are struggling with the absence of socialization with families and friends and loneliness becomes real. The Bible has a lot to say about hope. One of the hardest things to do as a Christian is to have faith that God is working. And to not be afraid of all the things that come our way.

Care Ministries is able to keep some good stuff happening during this time. We are trying hard to connect with people. We have several followers on our Facebook posts and people look forward to the tips that are posted. I look to God for so much of my inspiration to keep on going.

Since the hospitals canceled so many non-essential surgeries and procedures, we have fewer people in the hospitals and rehabs right now. The staff connects weekly and we talk about those that need tending. Pastor Chris and I have made many phone calls to our isolated members. Mary Lou Charapata and I have delivered some masks to members who needed them to get to the grocery store. I have talked many hours each week to members that do not have internet access since I am limited in how much I physically can help people due to the risk with my medically-fragile Grace at home. But I try to find those that need someone that I can offer hope and optimism to by email or a phone call. A few weeks ago, I sent out 68 Portals of Prayer to some members over 70. I sent out 30 Christ in the Home devotionals to our homebound. I sent out 10 Grief Share books to our Grief Share participants. I have sent cards and Care Notes to those without internet connection who have needed some extra TLC.

As we see the death tolls in this pandemic, we may question having confidence in God and trusting in him. If we look to God he will give us the strength we need to carry through these dark times. With God as our strength and our guiding light, we can overcome and rise above these hardships.

“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31

Brenda Lytle, RN
Director of Care Ministries

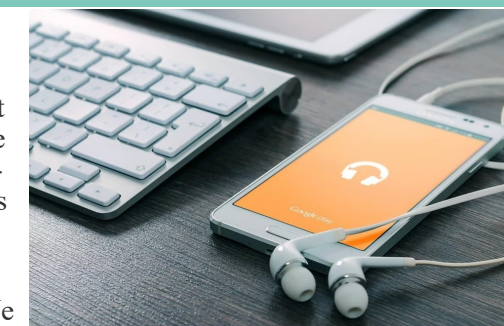
Buy Plants and Raise Funds for Care Ministries

We will not be running the traditional Care Ministries Plant Sale this year due to the pandemic; however, Shady Lane Greenhouse, our vendor for this annual fundraiser, has generously offered to donate 25% of in-person sales from people of Ascension.

Please know that Care Ministries is not encouraging people to leave their homes during the stay-at-home order. This plant sale fundraiser for Care Ministries will extend until July 4 this summer.

If you shop in-person, make sure to let them know you’re from Ascension.

Shady Lane Greenhouse is located at WI72N7388 Shady lane, Lannon, WI 53051. They are presently open M-F 9-4, Sat. 9-3, and Sun. 10-2.



From Facebook: How can we combat the loneliness of social distancing?

AT&T had a slogan, “Reach out and touch someone.” Not physically but picking up the phone and making a connection. During these times that could be the best advice to combat loneliness.

There are other ways to stay connected during social distancing. A quick, “I’m thinking about you” text could make someone’s day. Sending pictures to one another is a fantastic way to send love. Sending random photos of what the kids are up to might be a daily highlight for a lonely grandmother. Those with computers have some options with Google Hangouts is free and can be used for messaging or free video or voice calls with one person or a whole group. For iPhones, there is the Facetime option, but it only works with other iPhones or iPads. This is a great option for virtual happy hours or family reunions.

Zoom can be used for virtual happy hours and family get-togethers. Skype is another option. Facebook has a whole host of virtual connectivity options.

The Bible tells us to spend time and bear with one another in community. No matter what stage of life you are in, you always have something to share or learn from others. You are called to love one another, lift each other up, and be the friend that each of us longs for. Many elderly do not have the virtual options with Internet and computers. Most of them do have phones. Make a goal to call someone everyday to help brighten their day.

“Carry one another’s burdens; in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” -Galatians 6:2

Zoom Yoga

We will be offering a FREE Zoom Yoga class by the instructor who has been teaching at Ascension, Jessica Popp, for anyone interested. It is free.

To sign-up, please email Brenda Lytle, brenda@ascensionelca.org, with your name and email so we can connect you to our Zoom class! Never tried yoga before? This is the perfect opportunity in the comfort of your OWN home! Come join us and stay healthy during these covid-19 times.



Small Groups: Still Connecting Us

Using technology, Ascension's small groups are still going strong while following safer-at-home guidelines.

From Bob Zastrow (AMEN): *AMEN Monday evening has met for the last two weeks by video conference using a service similar to Zoom (Join Me). We hope to continue next week and will be starting the study of Acts. Our gatherings have been different but fun. We look forward to the challenge of using the technology of today to get back into God's Word. AMEN Monday evening is open to additional men joining us on the video conference.*

Men can contact Bob Zastrow at rkzastrow@gmail.com or Steve Boyer at sboyer@healthmarkets.com to be added to the participation list.

From Jan Zastrow: *TGIT members have been texting, emailing, talking on the phone, sending cards. The Easter email was so heartwarming as each person checked in with one another. I have sent out individual emails with personal messages to each of my members Today, I will be sending a devotion on Psalm 40 with questions to meditate on. The theme of Psalm 40: As God delivers his people from trouble, they trust him more fully and long to tell others about his kindness. Seems applicable to our situation today. I have thought about using Zoom as a way to stay in touch, but not everyone has the capabilities, so I have hesitated. I may rethink that in the very near future.*

From Linda Hansen: *We are trying to have everyone in the group send their prayer requests to the group on the day we would normally meet. We've done it twice now and will do it again this Thursday. This is a way to keep people connected.*

From Shirley Wehmeier: *I use email to stay connected. We have always had a prayer chain for our group which includes people who have not been able to attend class but want to stay connected. Members send me prayer requests and I send them on to the group. I also have been sending an email/devotion during class time each week. I give suggestions for Bible reading for the week and prayer ideas. I encourage the group to respond with their thoughts on the topic. I get some people who respond each time and others I never hear from. We have several people who do not use computers so I have been in regular phone contact with them and have encouraged the rest of the class to give them calls also since they are not connected in other ways. We all agreed that we would pray at the same time each day throughout Lent.*

From Chris Holloway: *I gave group the option of continuing our study or taking a break. We chose to do a weekly devotion and fellowship hour with our favorite beverage every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. via Zoom. I have 14 people in my group and all but two have participated (working on them!). I open the meeting with prayer and a 10-15 minute devotion. Then I have a Chat Pack Question deck, and choose 3-4 questions for fun conversation. We then do Highs and Lows and end in prayer. All of the women in my group are 50+ in age, so our issues are aging parents and not being able to see our grandchildren during this quarantine. It's been great being able to "see" one another, sharing stories and praying together---admittedly, sometimes with a glass of wine.*

From Arlene Davis: *Our group has been keeping in touch by phone. Group members check on each other and offer to help with grocery deliveries and other things if needed.*

From Amanda Tenwinkel: *Our group met via Zoom this month. We had a few "technology bumps" but were pleased overall with the experience.*



Small group meeting, fall 2017

Partnership News

We have been in frequent contact with our partners in El Salvador and Tanzania during these difficult times. They see the news coming from the US and they are praying for us. They send their greetings and love to the people of Ascension.

We have had to postpone our May dinner auction that benefits our global partners. Right now would be a great time to support a local business by purchasing a gift card that you can donate to the auction later this year.



Pastor Julio's Maundy Thursday worship

El Salvador

El Salvador continues to be in a nation-wide lockdown due to the coronavirus. Schools and most businesses are closed. The *agroferreterrias* are closed, so those workers are without any income. Only one person per family is allowed to leave the house to go to the store; everyone else is expected to stay at home. There is a lot of fear about the virus and people who lived through the civil war are used to having to stay home and go without in order to stay safe, so there has not been much unrest about the lockdown.

The federal government has promised a one time emergency payment of \$300 per family and most families in San Jorge have received their payments. Some families do not have current government ID cards, so they are still waiting for their payment. While \$300 is a lot of money for most families in San Jorge, the cost of food in the local Super Selectos grocery store is the same or more than in our stores here in Wisconsin. The \$300 will not go far. The municipal government is doing what it can to provide families with emergency supplies of food. As of now, the nearest case of coronavirus is in Santa Elena, about 8km from Usulután and 18km from San Jorge.

Pastor Julio and Pastora Blanca are beginning to use Facebook to share worship services and mid-week Bible study since many families have at least one smartphone. Neither one of them is familiar with technology, so their children are helping them. During this crisis, evangelical churches are loudly proclaiming that the end of times is here and people must join their church in order to be saved. These churches are beginning to grow as people continue to be afraid.

Tanzania

The good news from Tanzania is they are having sufficient rain and the crops are growing well. However, a recent report from Facebook tells us that the rains have intensified in the Meru area. On April 23, the floods destroyed over 50 homes and took two lives.

As of the writing of this article, there are 147 people in Tanzania with the coronavirus. Crowded markets and places of worship are still open, but schools and many other businesses are closed. There is no online or home-schooling. The markets have started to have some scarcity due to border closings. Their president continues to rely on prayer as the best method of preventing the spread of the virus. He has said that all worship services should continue and declared April 17-19 as days of prayer for people of all faiths against the virus. In spite of the president's declarations, attendance is beginning to lessen at Samaria due to both fear of the virus and lack of transportation as many independent transportation operators have stopped driving people.

Pastor Makege and other church leaders are traveling around the community, educating the members of Samaria about the coronavirus. Samaria leaders have shared concerns with us that people are not taking the virus seriously enough and worry that if the virus spreads, their country does not have the medical capacity to deal with an epidemic. Pastor Makege has used some of the funds from Ascension to purchase hand sanitizer, hand-washing stations, face masks and other medical supplies for Samaria and the other preaching points.



Flooded property in Meru



A hand-washing station in Meru

Mission Outreach Updates

Block Party Save the Date: August 8 is our annual Block Party. At this point, we have made tentative plans but we are waiting to see how the virus situation and restrictions about large gatherings evolve. We will make a decision by the end of May.

Blessing Box: Our Blessing Box has truly been a blessing in our neighborhood. We see adults and children stopping by on a regular basis. Several members have been keeping the box supplied but we can use your help. When you are at the store, pick up a few extra items to keep in your car and then when you drive by the church, add it to the box. Current needs are basic foods, snacks, cleaning supplies and personal care items. Remember that the neighborhood kids are home and often stop by to pick up a snack or lunch items.

Little Free Library: Our Little Free Library is a great place to put books that you are finished reading. Think especially about the kids in the area that are at home. Some new books to read or activity and learning books help them with learning during these long days at home. Place your donations directly in the library while the church building is closed.

Community Partners

So many of our Community Partners have had major changes in how they do programming due to the virus. Major fund raisers have been canceled or rescheduled. For many of the non-profits, these fundraisers are a major source of their budget each year so not being able to hold them as scheduled impacts their income in a big way. Follow Mission Outreach on Facebook, [facebook.com/Ascension.ELCA.MO](https://www.facebook.com/Ascension.ELCA.MO), to see the dates for their activities and ways that you can help out. We try to keep the Facebook page updated with news from our Community Partners. Contributions can be made directly to the agencies. If you find yourself in need during this challenging time, help is available through these wonderful agencies. If you have any questions, contact Shirley Wehmeier, shwehmeier@gmail.com.

Food Pantry: Waukesha Food Pantry has had a significant increase in number of people coming to get food, many for the first time ever. With the loss of so many jobs, the need is continuing to grow. During the time that our church building is not open, please make donations directly to the Food Pantry on Sentry Drive. Needs include all food, cleaning and personal care items. And cash donations. More information online waukeshafoodpantry.org.

Hebron House: The shelters are open during the coronavirus crisis. Juno House provides shelter for women and families. Jeremy House provides programming and a place for those who are homeless and have mental health challenges, and the Siena House provides a safe place during the outbreak for adult men. The shelters are in need of contributions to expand bed space, pay staff, provide supplies to keep guests healthy and safe and hot meals delivered to the shelters. Urgent needs: rubber gloves, hand soap, cleaning supplies, toilet paper, paper towels, garbage bags, and hand sanitizer. Please contact the staff via email to arrange drop-offs: vjenkins@hebronhouse.org; website: hebronhouse.org/.

Mt. Meru Coffee Delivered

Are you missing your Sunday morning coffee at church? Did you know you can order Mt. Meru Coffee online and have it delivered to your home? Go to mtmerucoffee.org to place an order and get free shipping on orders of \$15 or more through May 31st.



Mt. Meru coffee: Supporting Families • Growing Futures • Changing Lives



Online Member Directory

To help members connect with one another, an updated directory is now available on our website, <https://ascensionelca.org/membership/directory/>. To access it, please email me, admin@ascensionelca.org, for the password. If you do not have access to email or the internet, please call the office and leave a message and we'll mail a copy.

Amy Gilgenbach
Director of Administration

A Word from Council

By the time this is in the newsletter, two months will have passed, and maybe more to come.

There are days, when anxieties are too much, can't possibly listen to one more news "special report," phones going off "breaking news," you can't get on to whatever website, everyone is on their computer. I cannot-do-this-for-one-more-second. God please get me through this. There is the answer – God. Our God is life giving, saving, and most of all loving. In challenging, stressful times God comforts, encourages and renews. Find the comfort in the one who gave you life and calls us beloved. Sometimes this is so clear to us, and other times we just don't have a clue. But know the hard days will pass and that He will never stop speaking to our hearts and souls. We are blessed.

Please remember in all your prayers – Ascension, Pastor Chris, Tony, Vicki, Ben, and all staff – all they do to provide us with our beautiful church and services to bring us through this difficult time and remember they are going through this too. Again, I am available by email angelks1@att.net to address any concerns or just talk.

Remember to continue to support Ascension, with online giving, direct deposit or in the mail. Someday we will look back to today and see Jesus was with us all along and brought us through.

Christ has risen! He has risen indeed! Alleluia!

Care, pray, love others.

Karen Simington
Council President

Treasurer's Report

In these times of economic uncertainty, Ascension's financial position remains solid. Despite our temporary transition to virtual worship in March, our first quarter contributions and other income are only about \$4,000 off from our budgeted giving and expenditures. Considering the enormous impact the coronavirus has had on the economy, this is a huge success, and I think it shows how important this church is to our members.

Our church has also taken steps to ensure that we can continue to operate and support our ministries for years to come. This includes securing a loan as part of the Payroll Protection Program recently enacted as part of the CARES Act. These funds will equal 2.5 months' worth of payroll, and a substantial portion of the loan will be forgiven as long as we keep our staff employed.

While the PPP funds will help to cover our payroll expenses over the short term, we ask you to remember that the church continues to have expenses even while our doors are shut. For example, we must still pay for insurance, the mortgage, and ministry work, just to name a few. If you haven't already, please consider enrolling in online giving to Ascension. This can be done by clicking the "Online Giving" tab on our website, ascensionelca.org.

Zach Wittchow
Treasurer



On the Road to Emmaus: We Had Hoped

Please enjoy this sermon excerpt from Pastor Chris on April 26.

It is a case of mistaken identity or, more to the point, a case of unrecognized identity. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus have no idea who joins them for their travel—they simply invite the stranger to walk with them. The road to Emmaus is one of seven post-resurrection stories, and, like the others, it is a little ghostly; the stranger whom the disciples do not recognize at first, who turns out to be the Messiah, who vanishes from their sight as soon as they know who he is. The crucifixion stories are not like this. They are one hundred percent solid. Jesus is nailed to the cross with a nameplate tacked above his head, where he dies in front of a hundred eyewitnesses. No case of mistaken identity here. No sudden appearance and disappearance. His death is real.

His resurrection, on the other hand, is largely rumor. Someone said that someone said his tomb was empty, but that could mean anything. Maybe his body was stolen. Maybe he revived and walked away. It was women who first spread the story, and everyone knew how they embellished things. Even those who saw him in the flesh had a hard time convincing anyone else it was true. Thomas did not buy it, not until he had seen for himself, and seven resurrection stories do not go very far. Jesus does not appear to everyone before he ascends to heaven, which left plenty of people to weigh the evidence for themselves, to listen to the testimony of those who were there and to decide if and what they would believe.

This, in a nutshell, is the situation of the after-Easter Church. And it is our situation today—a kind of remedial resurrection course today. One of those, “If you didn’t get it the first time,” kind of stories with all the pictures and words you need to hear in case you happen to miss the real thing on Easter Sunday. And even if you experienced worship on Easter Sunday, it is possible you still walked away in disbelief and doubt. And if that is the case—then here is your refresher to help you find some ground on which to stand. The resurrection is no hoax. None of us was there, for the real death or the rumored resurrection. All of us must decide what to make of the truth of what we have heard. But if it is all true, then we have more than hearsay to make up our minds. If the Lord is risen indeed, then we may base our decision on our own encounter with the living God. The question is, what is his address? Where do we go to make that encounter happen and to experience for ourselves the joy of a face to face engagement with the Lord of Life, the Savior of the world?

For Luke, the answer is somewhere on the road to Emmaus. Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us the story of what happened on that road, but everyone has walked it at one time or another. It is the road you walk when your team has lost, your dreams are crushed, your loved one has died—the long road back to the empty house, the piles of unopened mail, to life as usual, if life can ever be usual again. It is the road of deep disappointment, and walking it is the active movement of sadness, just like the two disciples in the reading for today. It takes two hours to walk seven miles, and that is how long they have to talk over the roller coaster ride of the past three days. The trial, the crucifixion, the silent procession to the tomb. And then the women’s vision of angels, the empty grave. Real death. Rumored resurrection.

They are talking it all over when the stranger comes up behind them and asks them what they are talking about, so that they stop in their tracks to look at him. “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days? Cleopas asks him, but the truth is they are both glad for his company and so they walk with him, matching their stride to his as they tell him everything they know.

They tell him how things had looked so promising at first, when Jesus impressed everyone with his knowledge of Scripture and miraculous acts, and then how things had gone downhill from there—so far down the hill that there was nothing left for them to do but to go back home, dragging their dreams in the dust behind them. “We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel,” they say to the stranger. “We had hoped.” We thought he was the one. We believed that things might really change for the better. We had hoped things would be different, but we were wrong. He died. It is over now. No more dreams. No more promises. “We had hoped he was the one.”

“We had hoped,” are the words many of us are speaking today.

We had hoped graduation would still happen.

We had hoped to be present for the birth of our new grandchild.

We had hoped to go on our honeymoon.

We had hoped to keep our job.

We had hoped to buy our first house.

We had hoped our marriage would survive. We had hoped our grandmother would survive the virus.

We had hoped others would keep us safe by staying home.

We had hoped our daughter would have had the necessary protective equipment in her nursing.

We had hoped our world was more ready for a pandemic.

We had hoped that the common good would be more important than the freedoms of the individual.

That is when their walking partner explodes at them. “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! “How foolish to believe that your needs are more important than the needs of all of us collectively together,” Jesus might say.

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” If you had read your Bibles, Jesus might have said, you would understand everything that has happened and none of it would be a surprise to you. It is right there in black and white; the Messiah is not the one who wins the power struggle; he is the suffering servant, the broken one, who comes into his glory with his wounds still visible. Those holes in his hands and feet are the proof that he is who he says he is, because the way you recognize the Messiah—the chosen one of God—and his followers—is not by their muscle, not by their power, but by their scars.

Which means that they are not to hate the painful parts of their lives anymore. Which means that they don’t have to look at their defeats as failures anymore. Which means that they are not to fear their enemies anymore, not even death itself. Regardless of all they know, these disciples are to follow their leader into the scariest, darkest, most dangerous places in the world armed with nothing but a first aid kit, because the disciples, like Jesus, are not fighters but healers—wounded healers—whose educations are their own hurts and pains.

The stranger begins tell the two disciples about Moses and working his way through the prophets of the old Testament. The stranger opens Scriptures to them and they hang on his every word. They are wounded, and what the stranger is telling them is good news. Maybe they are not the losers after all. Maybe the rumors of resurrection are true. Just maybe there is reason to resurrect their crucified hope. When they arrive at their village and he shakes their hands goodbye, they do not want him to go. They have not heard enough of his words and so they invite him to stay and he does. But his house guest, this stranger, acts like he owns the place. It is their table, their food, but when the three sit down together, it is the stranger, the guest, who acts as host, who reaches out, takes the bread, says the blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Maybe it is the strangeness of this man who, though guest, acts as host or maybe it is in the breaking of the bread—that familiar action—something they have seen him do before on a green hillside by the Sea of Galilee with five loaves and two fish or maybe in an upper room with bread and Passover wine. The stranger takes, blesses, and breaks the bread only to offer the pieces to the two disciples who begin to see through their darkness—the light that is standing in front of them offering bread. And as soon as they understand who he is, Jesus is gone.

The good news is the blindness and the broken heartedness of the two disciples does not keep their Savior from coming to them. Jesus does not offer his after Easter appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the discontent. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home with words of, “We had hoped...” on their lips.

Jesus seems to prefer working with broken people, with broken dreams, in a broken world. If someone hands him a whole loaf of bread, he will take it, bless it, break it, and give it, and he will do the same things with his own flesh and blood, because that is the way of life God has called him to show the rest of us; to take what we have been given, whether we like it or not, and to bless it, to say thank you for it, and to break it because that is the only way it can be shared and to hand it around—not to eat it all by ourselves but to find someone to eat it with, so that the broken bread may bring all of us broken ones together into one body, where we may leave our words of, “We had hoped...” for words of, “He is risen!” We come to the empty tomb to celebrate that fact together. Just in case we may not have caught on. Just in case we were asleep when God moved the mountains, stilled the water, and caused all of creation to be silent for that brief moment when Jesus rose from the dead and walked into our lives again. We leave the words of, “We had hoped,” for the words of Jesus—“I am the resurrection and the life!”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.



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