



**Sunday, April 26, 2020, Easter 3 “Glimmer of God”
The Rev. Dr. Mary Brennan Thorpe, Canon to the Ordinary**

My cellphone rang the other day. It was a number that I didn't recognize, but my anti-RoboCaller app didn't flag it, so I answered. A woman's voice, with a strong Alabama drawl. I knew immediately who it was – my grad school roommate from – dare I admit it? – 1975.

As with most unexpected phone calls these days, my head went instantaneously to a dark place – what's wrong? Did someone die? But she said in a chipper voice, “I've decided that while we're going through all this, every day I'll call someone I haven't talked to in a while. Just to check in.”

Last time we talked was a couple of years ago, in the busy-ness of both our lives. But she's a huge extrovert, so it's not surprising that she took this up as a spiritual discipline of sorts, this connection, this checking in. We all of us, including introverts like me, are doing more and more of this kind of phone call.

We say: Are you okay?

Isn't this strange?

How are you doing? I know you live alone and your children are far away. Or: I know you're the sole caregiver to your spouse who has...you name the challenge. How is your spouse?

These kinds of connections keep us going in a time when we feel isolated and perhaps frightened, whether we're making or receiving the calls.

That feeling of isolation, of worry, was present in spades among those followers of Jesus Christ who were hiding themselves in a second-story walkup in Jerusalem in the wake of his murder on Good Friday. They had heard from the women that Jesus was risen from the dead – remember that this is Luke's narrative, not the narrative of John, whose story of Doubting Thomas was told last week - but that didn't give them the clearest picture of what was to happen next. Jesus said they should carry out his work, to be sure, but how were they to do that without Jesus, the maker of miracles, the fearless teacher, the compassionate leader?

It's not surprising that a couple of their number decided it was time to head for home. To Emmaus, to be exact. Anything was better than continuing to stay in that small apartment



with a bunch of paranoid Jesus followers, with no running water and no electricity, right? How would one charge one's phone?

So these two set off on that road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about 7 miles' distance. Not a bad walk, and it felt good to get away from that claustrophobic place, with all its awful memories. But the memories traveled with them, these two disciples. They were talking, on and on, about the weirdness of it all. The whole scene – Jesus being grabbed by the soldiers, Judas and his role in all this, the frightening time when Jesus was being tried and convicted, and then his death... and their fear, and their wondering what had happened, how someone like Jesus should end this way.

Walking on a road, full of confusion, no sense of what was next – was there a next for the followers of Jesus? – trying to sort it out. And as was often the case for those traveling along that road, a major thoroughfare, someone else came walking up beside them. They hadn't noticed his approach, but it's likely they wouldn't have heard him because they were so busy talking between themselves. But he inserted himself into that conversation, and somehow, it didn't seem rude or intrusive, just sort of ... unusual. This stranger didn't seem to know much about current events, about the big doings in Jerusalem, about the crucifixion, and the women and all that.

And now he stopped them, for by now they were rambling on in an endless tumble of words. And he said “well, all of this aligns with what had been foretold” and he laid out exactly how this was the story of the Messiah, the Anointed One, in the sacred texts.

They didn't know who he was. “Their eyes were kept from recognizing him,” in the words of the Gospel. They just listened, and we can imagine them nodding their heads and saying “hmmm, that makes sense. Wow!”

They kept walking companionably, the three now rather than just the two. And as the walk progressed, and as it approached sunset, they knew it was probably unsafe to continue – they'd be targets for thieves on the highway – and the two decided to stop for the night, inviting this new friend to join them. He did so, and when they began to dine together – it seems something of a Jewish Shabbat dinner in a way – he blessed the bread and broke it... and suddenly they realized with whom they were dining, just as he disappeared from their sight.

A glimpse of hope for the future after despair, just a shimmer of light in that moment. Jesus was risen from the dead. Jesus was among them.

To have such a glimpse, and then have it end as quickly as it began – it might be a cause for renewed despair, after all, he was gone again – but something remained in them. They knew they needed to go back and tell the others, the others still huddled in that cenacle of fear. They knew that they had been changed somehow.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

The shimmer of light that warmed their hearts continued even though his physical presence had slipped away. It energized them, gave them the courage to endure, to make that walk back in the dark on that highway, to go back up the stairs to that room, to tell their story to the others.

Where is our shimmer of light?

We live now in a time when we feel alone, perhaps frightened, wondering what the future may bring. Will we get sick? Will we die alone? Will we lose someone we love? Or even the lesser fears, about jobs, our homes, continuing our schooling.

Where is our shimmer of light?

For those of us who are clergy, we worry about our parishioners, about the viability of our churches, about whether people will come back to church once this is all over. We worry about the lonely ones, the sick, the ones who do not know Jesus Christ. We worry about our own strength to serve in a way we could never have imagined.

We grieve over our inability to be in our sacred spaces. We miss the physicality of the faith community, the hugs, the patting on the back, the handshakes.

And yet time and again we hear stories that show how, even when we’re walking our own road toward Emmaus, our hearts are warmed by something. It could be a sign by the side of the road cheering on health care workers. It could be the wisdom of a parent or a spiritual director or a friend saying “we’ll get through this somehow even though it’s hard.” It could be a friend with whom we haven’t spoken in months or years saying “just checking in – is it well with you?”

The shimmer of light is there.

God’s providence, Jesus’ healing, comes through our encounters with all sorts of surprising people in all sorts of surprising places, even at the Kroger in our masks or as the postal worker delivers the mail.

In my work with parishes, even during difficult times, there are moments where that glimmer of light comes through, and afterwards someone says “you know when that thing happened? I felt God with me at that moment. I knew I wasn’t alone.” God’s presence will make itself known, if you are open to feeling it, to hearing it, to seeing it, even in the most unlikely circumstances.

A week ago Friday, someone dear to me completed his treatment for cancer. Later, I saw a FaceBook post of his zoom conversation with his siblings, spread across the country. They were laughing. There was hope. That gleam of light: God was among them, though not all of them might have articulated that strange warmth in their hearts with that language. No matter – God knew, and God loved them.

God's providence is sure. Jesus Christ is risen. He walks on this pandemic road with us and makes himself known to us in the smile, in the phone call, in the Zoom webinar, in the wave from across the street, from the dog who curls up in your lap, from the grandparent who participates in the online service at their grandchild's parish from five states away... so many different ways that Jesus makes himself known to us. And he makes himself known to us by letting us understand in this most unusual season, church is not just a building. Church is being the gathered people of Christ. Gathered in different ways, to be sure, but gathered as members of the Body of Christ, even those who are invisible members, who are questioning members, who are frightened members, who are broken members. We are gathered in Christ's heart, and our heart beats with his, warmed by his light. And even if we do not see the physical presence of Christ, even if we do not sit in the physical presence of our beloved buildings, we are still the Body of Christ.

So how can the Body of Christ shimmer? I hear the stories all the time of what it means to be the church in this pandemic season, from all over the diocese:

To continue – in a safe way – a feeding ministry or a food pantry

To continue to support our faith communities and our partner ministries financially, even sacrificially;

To continue to reach out to the lonely and isolated;

To pray for those with whom we can not be physically present;

To find ways to laugh and trust and hope when all those things seem in short supply;

To grieve for those who have died and to grieve with those who mourn them;

To sew masks, and sing songs, and offer love to those who may feel unloved.

Because we are loved. Because Jesus warms us through so many beloveds around us. Because we are made to love and we are made for love.

So shimmer.

Be the love, the light, the warmth, today. You'll be surprised how warm your heart will feel in the midst of it.

Amen.