

April 23, 2023

“Living Your Best Life: What Has He Done For Me Lately?”

Acts 2:36-41; Luke 24:13-35

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Pastor Brian kicked off our new sermon series last week. We are exploring what it means to be “Faithful Followers” of Christ. Today, we are considering how we are focusing what happened after 2 disciples encountered the risen Christ and how their example encourages us to share our stories, our witness, so that others might know what God has done for us.

About a month ago, I got a new phone—the iPhone 14. I was so excited. I had had my old phone for about 3 years, and it was an SE—which is one of the “cheap” iPhones. It had been fine for quite a while, but the battery was starting to die and I had to charge it 2-3 times just to get through the day. I was excited to get a new phone—to have the upgraded cameras, the bigger screen, the battery that would last not just all day- but even into the next day. I took my new phone with me on my trip to Disney World. It was great.

Until this week. This week, I realized that my wonderful new phone is not getting voicemails. I have no idea why, but people are leaving messages and I am not getting them until the next day. This leads to some awkward moments when someone will say, “Did you listen to my message?” and I have no idea what they’re talking about. It’s frustrating. I don’t love my new phone so much—in fact, sometimes these days, it makes me want to scream!

This is a case of what psychologists call the recency effect. We tend to best remember and dwell on the thing that's happened most recently. My phone still has a great new camera, the battery lasts me all day, I can use the GPS, get my email... All great stuff, but this is all tainted by my trouble this week with receiving messages.

I understand that in business, they call it, "Hedonic Adaptation" a fancy name for happiness that burns out quickly. Like when a little kid gets a toy and they declare it "the best birthday present ever." Then, 2 days later, the toy sits, forgotten about, at the bottom of the toy box or shoved under the bed.

We humans are a fickle bunch, aren't we. Always looking for the next big thing- the bigger and better? Asking the question, "what have you done for me lately?" And, we don't just do this with stuff. Often times, we ask this question in our relationships, as well.

Janet Jackson famously captured this in her song from the '80s. I know that she didn't coin the phrase, but when you Google it, you would think that she did.

In relationships, it can be easy to forget all that has happened before and to remember only the most recent- the most recent high or low, surprise or disappointment, sign of care or indifference. We do this even in our relationship with God. We celebrated Easter 2 weeks ago. Since that time, there has been joy and celebrations, but there's also been deaths and illnesses, disappointments and grief, anxiety and fear, sadness and loss. And we might find ourselves thinking, "Yes, I'm glad that Jesus rose from the dead, but that was so long ago. Where is God now? What is God up to today? What good is the resurrection to me for my everyday life in 2023? In other words, "What has He done for me lately?"

This is where I'm glad that the gospels don't just end with the **empty tomb**. They go on to tell more stories of Jesus, still present and active in the lives of His disciples. If we look at each of these resurrection stories, we find that each person, each follower, met Jesus not when they were at their best, but during some of the most difficult times in their lives. And, time and time again, they had trouble recognizing Him and sensing His presence.

Take our gospel reading today. In the passage that Pastor Brian read earlier this morning, we have 2 disciples, 2 followers of Jesus who were heading from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a town that historians have had a hard time finding on a map. As they walked along, they were talking about everything that had happened. If we put ourselves in their sandals, we can imagine that they were feeling betrayed, confused, disappointed. They were followers of Jesus. They had hoped that He would be the one to save them from the oppression that they were facing. They had watched as Jesus, their teacher and leader, had been arrested, tried, beaten and crucified. They must have been in mourning. Perhaps feeling lost. They had heard the news of the empty tomb, but had no idea what it meant. So, they were headed toward Emmaus, discussing what had happened.

Maybe Emmaus was their home. Or maybe they had business there, or maybe they were just trying to escape the terrible things that had happened in Jerusalem.

Famous biblical commentator Frederick Buechner interprets Emmaus as "the place we go in order to escape — a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, 'Let the whole [darn] thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.'" It may be going shopping and buying new clothes or a car or smoking a cigarette. It might be checking out in front of Netflix for hours on end. It's whatever we do and wherever we go when we want to forget all that is happening in the world. When we no longer have any

more cares to give. When we feel like even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die” (New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Volume 9, p. 482).

And, as the travelers were heading toward Emmaus, Jesus met them, came alongside them, and walked with them. Yet, they didn’t understand. They didn’t recognize Him—until later.

The travelers’ story is our story, too. We can see ourselves in their journey. In those times that we have been walking through pain and sadness, fear and despair, betrayal and heartbreak. When we have felt like we didn’t have any more cares to give. Jesus comes alongside us and walks with us, often times without us realizing it.

An old poem that’s been attributed to several different authors captures these feelings. In “Footprints in the Sand” Mary Stevenson writes,

One night I dreamed I was walking
along the beach with the Lord.
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,
other times there were one set of footprints.

This bothered me because I noticed that
during the low periods of my life, when I was
suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat,
I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, “You promised me
Lord, that if I followed you,
you would walk with me always.
But I have noticed that during the most trying periods
of my life there have only been
one set of footprints in the sand.
Why, when I needed you most,
you have not been there for me?”

The Lord replied,
“The times when you have
seen only one set of footprints,
is when I carried you.”
– Mary Stevenson

Often it is only when we look back on the hard and difficult times in our lives that we can recognize God’s presence—just like the travelers in our story today. Their eyes were not opened until Jesus was revealed through the breaking of the bread. They responded with, “weren’t our hearts burning?” How did we not know?

The experience of God is something that is transitory. God is always with us, but we don't always recognize His presence, and He is always on the move. As Kate Bowler puts it—every minute can't be a moment. Sometimes, we have to have some time to look back, to see where God has carried us through difficult times or blessed us through the good.

As soon as the travelers realized that they had been in the presence of the risen Christ, what did they do? They ran back to Jerusalem to tell the others. Just like the women and Peter who gazed into the empty tomb. They had to share their story.

This, in fact, is how God frequently works is through word of mouth- through ordinary people who feel a nudge to reach out and care- to share their own story so that we might know that we aren't alone. For, just as we see ourselves in the travelers' story, so others can see their own struggles in ours and take heart in knowing that God is still at work.

Jesus' presence didn't just end 2000 years ago, but the risen savior is with us today.

What would've happened if the disciples had never shared their stories? Where would we be? Somehow, we have gotten the idea that our faith is personal. It's embarrassing to share it. We are afraid how someone else might react or that we will offend someone or that we might be rejected. But, Scripture shows us a different way—that faith and our experiences with the Risen Savior are meant to be shared in love. Someone shared their experience with someone who shared it with someone who shared it with someone down through the ages until someone shared it with you.

Now, you may be thinking, "I can't do that". Trust me- I'm an introvert- I share your racing heart and sweaty palms. But, it doesn't have to be as hard as we think. We don't have to have all the answers—just look at the women who ran from the tomb- they couldn't explain it- neither could the disciples in the room when Jesus entered- neither could the travelers on the road to Emmaus. All they knew is what they experienced, and that is what God calls us to share with one another—our experiences of the God who was not only raised from the dead, but still walks with us today. Notice that we aren't sharing judgment- I can't think of anyone who is won to Christ through judgment, but rather through love and grace.

Allow me a minute to share part of my own story. To tell what God has done for me- perhaps it will bring some hope and peace to someone out there who is struggling today.

Once upon a time (Just kidding). Not so long ago, I was struggling through a deep depression. Yes, even pastors can be depressed— so let me say that there is no shame in this. It doesn't mean that you need to pray harder or have more faith. It means that you are struggling, and let me just say that there is help. There are counselors and medication that can help. Brian and I are here to help. You aren't alone.

That's a reminder that I needed. I was going through a time when I felt lost, alone, betrayed, heartbroken. It felt like I could hardly breathe from the weight that had settled on my chest. Some days, it felt like an anxiety attack was coming at any moment. One night in particular- and I can't remember now what happened- because you know, when you're depressed, your mind just isn't thinking clearly. But one night, I found myself lying on the floor in my closet, sobbing. I felt so lost. So afraid. So alone. In moments, I wondered if anyone cared or would notice if I just disappeared. It was like I was spiraling into a deep pit and I just couldn't stop it. I was praying the whole time. "God help me" was about the only prayer, the only words that I could get out. But, despite my prayers and even though I knew in my heart of hearts that God loved me, I still felt alone and could hardly breathe. And, I just kept going through the tissues.

About 5 minutes later, my cell phone rang. It was my sister. I sent it to voicemail because I didn't want to talk to anyone at that moment. 5 minutes after that, my best friend called. Again, I sent it to voicemail. 5 minutes after that, my mom called. Again, I sent it to voicemail, but by this time God had my attention. A few minutes later, I got a text from another dear friend who told me that she was praying for me. I had never before or since gotten phone calls from those who loved me so close together. In that moment, I knew that God was telling me something—God was answering my prayer.

Eventually, I pulled myself together, and I called each person back. Feeling the darkness lift, ever so slightly with each call. As I look back, I believe that God was working through each of these women to remind me that I mattered. That I was loved. That there was still hope.

None of them knew what was happening when they called. They just thought, "I need to give Amy a call". They didn't need to know what scripture or prayer to say. They didn't need to understand why they felt compelled to call, they just had to pick up the phone. To be present.

And, when I opened up to one, she said, without judgment, "I remember feeling that way too one time. She said, I remember praying and asking God to hold me—and it was as if I could feel His arms around me."

She shared her story with me, I am sharing mine with you, because Christ is still alive among us. And, He needs us to share our stories with one another. I don't believe that God makes bad things happen so that we can help someone else, but I do believe that God can take a trying situation that we are going through and resurrect it—bring new life through it so that the pain and suffering that we experience simply because it is part of life and being human—so that that pain can offer hope to another who might know that they aren't alone- so that they might dare to look to see where Christ is walking with them, or carrying them through this time. I truly believe that this is how God works most of the time—through ordinary people who say yes to his guidance.

You could be the answer to someone else's prayer. You don't have to be a pastor or have special words or to share your story. In fact, it's often more powerful when you don't. You know your story. You know how God is working in your life. All you have to do is share it.

Sandra Yerian, part of our church family, has agreed to share a part of her story with you today, and I trust that you will be uplifted....

Everyone has a story. God is at work in our world, in our lives, often long before we recognize it. Look around—yes, it's ok to turn around in church, someone here or in your life needs to hear your story, and someone here has a story to share with you. God makes our stories matter—Our encounters with the risen Christ are meant to be shared. There's so much that God has done for us lately, let us go and share our stories so that others might know that He lives.