

Call on the Name of the Lord
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

- ¹ I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
- ² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
- ³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- ⁴ Then I called on the name of the Lord:
'O Lord, I pray, save my life!'
- ¹² What shall I return to the Lord
for all his bounty to me?
- ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,
- ¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
- ¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.
- ¹⁶ O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving-maid.
You have loosed my bonds.
- ¹⁷ I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord.
- ¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
- ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
- Praise the Lord!

Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' ¹⁹He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in

deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.²⁵ Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Three weeks ago I asked you to join me in praying for a man named Jeff, who had been one of the pastors of the church whose example I followed in planning for this Lent. I had asked prayers because he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer the week after I saw him at my continuing education event in March. This past Wednesday, I included him in our prayers at the Wednesday Bible Study because he had moved to hospice care. Thursday, he died. Jeff knew many, impacted many, mattered to many so I have seen for days people posting on Facebook tributes to his life as a pastor, a community organizer, a friend, a parent. Radical hospitality. Generosity of spirit. Kindness. Gentle. Energy. Passionate about justice. A storyteller. And I made a point of reading others' words about their friend, mentor, colleague, father, husband because I had glimpsed these qualities the two times I met him and had conversation with him. I read them because they confirmed he really was who he seemed to be, which confirmed my first impression of him. I read them because it was as

close as I was going to get to experiencing him again. Because he had just moved to Chicago from Washington D.C. for a position, I had actually imagined we'd run into one another in the course of ministry in the Midwest, and I looked forward to experiencing for myself how he lived up to these first impressions. And now that opportunity was no more. And it made me sad, and it makes me sad, some for me and a whole lot more for those who knew him deeply and well, and just one month after his diagnosis wrote things like "I would have hugged you tighter if I'd known it would be the last time I'd get to" and "If I'd known that would be the last time I would have stuck around for one more glass of wine."

Radical hospitality. Generosity of spirit. Kindness. Gentle. Energy. Passionate about justice. A storyteller. Jeff was not Jesus but his life was so clearly marked as a follower of Jesus who is the Christ, the anointed. Jesus who demonstrated radical hospitality, who exuded generosity of spirit, who was kind and gentle and full of energy, who was passionate about justice, who was a storyteller. And I understand in a new way why the disciples on the road stood still, looking sad. There would be no more opportunities to experience him, facing mournful thoughts of "If I had only known." We don't read that they behaved like the psalmist, calling upon the name of the Lord in their distress and anguish but I'd like to give them the benefit of the doubt. After all, the psalmist doesn't say that calling upon the Lord erased the sadness, nor does he proclaim that the Lord removed him from the snares of death and the pangs of Sheol - we only know he considers his bonds loosened. Instead, we read that in the midst of the difficulty, he called on the name of the Lord, paying vows, offering thanksgiving sacrifice, praising the Lord. Among the expressions of grief about Jeff's death, over and over I read the affirmation that in life and in death we belong to God. Sadness while calling upon the name of the Lord.

And it's important to note what Professor J. David Dark points out: "As we take up the testimony of the psalmist, we note that the words of exultation are never speculative nor somehow dutifully optimistic...The witness does not entertain a God who, in some vague or strained sense, might yet come through. On the contrary, this God has been called upon by a beleaguered party, one for whom all hope was lost, and this God has heard and responded

to the call.”¹ Most of us are old enough to look back and name a time or two (or twenty) when God did, indeed, provide during distress. Most of us know, too, that we recognize God in hindsight far more often than in the moment. Who can find fault with the disciples, who asked “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Earlier this past week I was introduced to a specific writing of the mystic Julian of Norwich, who lived from 1342 to 1416. She wrote, “If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in the same precious love.” The echoes of the psalmist are unmistakable. In this season of Easter, we remember with greater awareness that Christ defeated death for us all. His own hardships are proof that we should not expect that we would be free of hardship, but also his resurrection is proof that death doesn’t have the final say, loss isn’t the last word. It can hurt. It can make us angry. It can make us feel cheated. It can cause us to grieve. I know you could help me go on. But death is not the end.

Today’s reading from Luke includes my favorite sacramental sentences: When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him... I love it because it makes plain how central coming together around a meal is in our knowing and seeing Jesus. And here today it declares that, in the midst of deep, deep sorrow, we can find ourselves surprised with relief from the threats of death through the simplest of things, simply because sorrow is not where it ends. In my newsletter note for May, I quoted the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts who wrote, “For the early Christians, *gathering on Sunday* was itself a weekly remembrance of the resurrection.”² Coming together like this on a Sunday is a way of saying “Take that, death. Take that, grief. Take that, sorrow. We find hope despite you.” We are the psalmist - we suffer distress and anguish and call on the name of the Lord, we pay our vows to the Lord in the presence of God’s people. Praise the Lord!

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 406/8.

² *<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/introduction-to-eastertide-the-season-of-easter/>

Let us pray: Lord, we come to you for hope. Hear our voices and our supplications, we pray.
Amen.