

Grace and Peace to you in the name of our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus, and greetings from Central Plains Mennonite Conference. I'm Amanda Bleichty, the Conference Minister for Christian Formation here in Central Plains Mennonite Conference. It is good to be here with you this morning, however it is that we find ourselves in the midst of these strange, long days. While I and the other Conference Ministers are excited to join you in-person, soon, I'm thankful for these technologies that help us to connect, even when we are quite distant.

I'm recording these words for you from the 1910 farmhouse on the dairy farm where I live with my husband Jon and our 9 month old son, Henry, near Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. I've sent Jon and Henry out on an errand to gather eggs and look at the cows while I record. :) /

Several years ago I had a dog, really little more than a pup, whose name was Pip. Pip was my intrepid companion on many a long walk, we especially liked to ramble around at a nearby County park. On the bluffs overlooking the Skunk River, I'd walk and she'd circle around me, wreaking havoc with the leash, over gently rolling hills. One time she "saved" me from a big black snake crossing the path in front of me, but most of the time she just entertained me on our walks—by sniffing and snorting and always exploring. One day though, in the middle of a walk, Pip stopped short—and she began foaming at the mouth and gagging and throwing up. And I thought she was going to die on me, right there on the trail. After looking at her with alarmed curiosity for a moment or two, I quickly went into panic mode—what on earth had happened? And how? This wasn't how I thought our friendship would end. I turned us around and headed back up the trail—I knew that I didn't want to have to carry her out if she wasn't able to walk.

I tried to call my husband Jon, but he didn't pick up. I needed advice! Should I run her to the vet? Should I head home immediately so that we could cradle her dying body in our arms?

When Jon didn't pick up, I called my dad, desperate for some advice. He answered and I went breathlessly through her symptoms. She was foaming and vomiting and sluggish—what should I do!?! But before I had even finished describing what was happening, Dad had an answer for me. Pip ate a toad.

Apparently toads don't taste very good. The symptoms I was observing were Pip trying to get the awful taste of that toad out of her mouth—and with just a drink or two of water, she was back to normal. /

Our story today, this Emmaus story, begins with companions on a journey who also have a bad taste in their mouths. These companions are some of Jesus' followers. They had been following Jesus for weeks, maybe months, years?—only to find that they've followed him to a shocking and gruesome and horrifying death. To an ending they did not expect—And in

their grief and shock, we find these companions as they've packed up their lives as followers of Jesus and headed home, to Emmaus, leaving behind the chaos and sadness of Jerusalem.

These companions, Cleopas and his friend, they use the miles home to try to understand what on earth they have just witnessed. Was Jesus who they thought he was? If he was, how could Jesus allow himself to die? How did GOD allow Jesus to die? What were they supposed to do now? Could they trust what Jesus had told them? Were they in danger because they had followed Jesus? The companions used the miles home to try to get the bitter taste of toad out of their mouths. /

Perhaps today these disciples are not the only ones who have joined Pip in taste-testing toads. Here we are—the second Sunday after Easter. Spring is in the air! Birds are singing! The weather is beautiful! Jesus is risen! And yet, things are not as sweet as we may have anticipated. There is, perhaps, a bitter taste that lingers in our mouths. Like these disciples, our lingering bitterness may be that life right now is not as we expected it to be. We taste the bitterness of cancelled plans, of loneliness, of too much time in front of a screen. The bitterness of quarantine, of sickness, of fear, of death. The bitterness of feeling trapped and uncertain. The bitterness of questions unanswered. Perhaps we come today, with Pip and these disciples, trying to escape the bitter taste of an unwanted toad./

As the disciples walked, a stranger, who wasn't really a stranger, fell into step with them. And he asked them what they were discussing. They were amazed that he had not heard what had happened in Jerusalem—as if there was anything else to discuss! They described to him the taste and shape of their bitterness. That they had followed Jesus—and believed in him, and they had hoped. They had hoped that he was the one to turn their lives around—that he would turn the world around. But now he was gone.

They told the stranger about the women and their story, how they had gone to the tomb early in the morning—but Jesus' body wasn't there. They told the stranger about their fears, their disappointments, their worry, their questions, their uncertainty about what to do next—and where to go—they told the stranger that they were going home. What else could they do?

And for his part, the stranger listened to their story—and then began one of his own. He told them things about the Messiah, the one they had followed, that they had never before understood. Jesus, the stranger in disguise, opened the scriptures to them, and helped them to know who it was that they had followed. He eased the bitterness that had built up in their mouths and in their hearts. He walked with them until they came to their village.

When they got to their home town, the stranger continued as if he were going to keep walking, but Cleopas and his friend pleaded with him. Stay with us, it's almost night. And so the stranger came in and sat down with them to eat. But once they were around the table, the

guest became the host as the stranger took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them.

In these tell-tale actions of hospitality, things Jesus, their teacher had done a million times as they sat around the table with him, the disciples recognized who the stranger really was. But as soon as they recognized him he disappeared. When he was gone, the disciples looked at one another in awe and amazement, and probably fear, and they said, “Oh my goodness! How did we miss that Jesus was the stranger!? He was walking with us all day! And thinking back, they admitted to each other that each had known a strange sensation, one that couldn’t be named at the time, one that they couldn’t place, one that they hardly even noticed, but had gained significance now that they knew Jesus had been with them the whole day. Was your heart....burning? Yeah. Mine too.

Though night had fallen, the disciples got up from the table, and reversed their steps on the Emmaus road. Back in Jerusalem, they found the Eleven who were still gathered together. The Eleven reported, “It’s all true—Jesus is risen and appeared to Simon, and the two replied, “We know! He walked with us all the way to Emmaus, but we only knew him when he came inside to eat with us and broke the bread.”/

I quickly volunteered to preach on this text, because, while I like all of the post-resurrection stories in the gospels, this one is my very favorite. I like all of these Easter stories, because they describe so well the reality of life as we know it. They speak to those of us who live in in-between times. In between the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the time when he will come again in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. In these stories, those who have known the physical presence of Jesus, find that he is with them still, even after death. And that speaks to those of us who have not known the physical presence of Jesus, but who are assured that Jesus is present with us, just the same.

This story has everything that I think a good Gospel story—or maybe ANY story should have. It’s got friendship, a journey, mistaken identity, good conversation, hospitality, an “aha” moment, and the grand resolution happens over a plate of carbs! But what this story really does so well is model the shape of so many of our seasons of faith. Seasons of uncertainty or fear. Seasons of sadness, of confusion, of death. Seasons of bewilderment, or bitterness. Seasons of our lives into which Jesus comes, often unbidden, unannounced, unseen. Seasons of our lives in which Jesus is present in our companions, or in the scriptures, or in our meals together, or in our Zoom calls.

Jesus joins us where we are, in whatever season of life we find ourselves in, and Jesus walks with us. He doesn’t demand joy in place of sadness, or resolute certainty in place of fear or worry, or even saccharine sweetness in place of bitter words, or thoughts, or tastes. But Jesus hears us as we are, and walks with us until our bitterness loses it’s edge, until within our

sadness, we can find snippets or slivers of joy, until in our worry or fear, we find some measure of calm assurance. Jesus joins us where we are, as we are.

Jesus is with us in whatever place we've found shelter, and stays close, even when others must be distant. Sometimes Jesus is in disguise, wearing the face of a stranger, or a friend, or a child, or a parent, or he comes as a voice, breaking the silence with a phone call. And sometimes we are out of practice in recognizing the One who draws close. How good it is that like our friends on the Emmaus' road, Jesus' presence in our lives does not depend on our ability to recognize him.

We, like those two disciples, are on a strange and unprecedented journey, but even in these times, even when we've tasted the bitterness of a toad, even when our plans are laid waste, when we are fearful and stressed, when we are overwhelmed, even then, the risen Christ walks alongside each of us. This week and beyond in expected and unexpected ways may you be made aware of the presence of the One who walks with us, who hears us, who loves us and who whispers to us strong and gentle words of much needed hope and peace, and, dear friends in Central Plains, when you think back over your hours, your days, your weeks that seem to blend together, may you remember a strange sensation, an insistent burning, a buzzing warmth deep within your heart, and may you take comfort in knowing that Jesus has been with you the whole time.