

“A Message for the Disillusioned”

Rev. Pen Peery

Date: May 12, 2024



For the past couple of weeks, we've been in a sermon series inspired by a book that our recent Willard Lecturer, Brian McLaren, wrote called "Do I Stay Christian?" It's a book that dares to acknowledge...and even sympathize with...some of the reasons why people drift away from the church (and the faith), and then makes the case for why staying committed matters.

This week, I want to speak a word to those who are disillusioned with Christianity or the church. It turns out, people have felt this way for a long time. Since the beginning, actually. Today's Scripture is evidence of that. This is a familiar passage that takes place immediately after Jesus's resurrection with people who didn't have a whole lot of expectation about what that all might mean.

Before I read it, please join me in prayer: *Even when we have heard it before, O Lord, make the word fresh. Help us to hear your truth and love and grace through it – so that we might be changed. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.*

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Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then 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?' He 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, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 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. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 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. 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.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 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. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has

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appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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I have a confession: many months ago when your worship leaders planned this sermon series, I didn’t quite put together that the Sunday we would address people who are disillusioned with the church would be on Mother’s Day. It sounds like a bit of a downer, right?

Here so many of you are – mommas with your kids in church...adult children with your mommas in town – just wanting to have a good morning and maybe eat a nice lunch...and here the preacher is talking about an uncomfortable topic.

Mother’s Day isn’t a liturgical or church holiday, of course. But...I’ve been around the block enough times to know that giving Mother’s Day a nod in the sermon on the second weekend in May is good for one’s vocational health.

Most mothers I know are experts at guarding against disillusionment. As an aside, last week we talked about being disappointed. Being disappointed is an emotional reaction to something that is particular and time-bound – you can be disappointed in a person, or an action, or a failure to see some outcome you expected...but then it passes and life moves on.

Being disillusioned is more general and more permanent. It’s a deeper, bigger kind of disappointment where you actually stop believing in someone or something.

Most - not all...because even mothers aren’t perfect...but most mothers I know don’t let themselves get disillusioned – even when there might be reason for it. I think that’s kind of how mothers are built. A mother’s love is resilient – able to cope with the hard knocks of parenting, and navigating things like self-absorbed (and adorable) toddlers...and volatile pre-teens...and fully-baked-but-not-fully-grown teenagers...and self-assured-but-not-yet-fully-matured young adults. Even in a vacuum (and – newsflash, we don’t live life in a vacuum), but even in a vacuum, mothering through that life-cycle is sure to be filled with some frustration, and disappointment, and some words and actions that come out sideways because kids don’t know how else to express them...and yet...amazingly...moms come out the other side with an unrelenting love *made stronger* by the ways they have kept believing in their kids.

My favorite – and previously quoted – poem about Mother’s Day is by Billy Collins, called “The Lanyard.” He captures the resilience of mother’s love as he writes about an experience he had making arts and crafts for his mom while at camp as a boy. Indulge me as I read:

*...I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing*

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*strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.*

*She gave me life [feeding me from her very self],
and I gave her a lanyard.*

*She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the air light*

*and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.*

*Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.*

*And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift –
not the worn truth
that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-toned lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.¹*

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The risen Jesus encountered two people walking down a road away from Jerusalem. They didn't know it was Jesus – the one who had poured out his life for their sake...the one who represented the unrelenting and

¹ The Lanyard, by Billy Collins (2007)

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grave-shattering love of God. They didn't know. All they knew was that they were beyond disappointment. They had **believed** that this prophet of God would change things – they **invested themselves** in his vision for the future – they **reordered their lives** to follow this man who talked about a different way to be. But in the end, it all ended the way they were afraid of: in defeat, in death, with promises unfulfilled.

Without knowing they were talking with Jesus, the two men spilled their souls:

“But we had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel...”

There is a sense of finality in that statement. A resolve.

For them, the hope is in the past tense...gone.

Here's what I know: I know that – sometimes – that's the way church can be for people.

It grieves me to say it, but it's true.

Sometimes – especially for those who have **fully** committed...for those who sacrifice their time...change their rhythms, and their lives...believe wholeheartedly that the church's mission is holy and good...worth their generosity and their investment – sometimes there comes a point where it all falls apart.

Sometimes it falls apart because the community that is supposed to stand by one another falls down on the job – and when that happens, especially repeatedly, it can be painful and lonely.

Sometimes it is because of a betrayal on the part of a trusted leader – a violation of a boundary that does damage. You've seen these stories in the news. They are tragedies and there are too many of them.

A lot of the time, though, the people I've known who get disillusioned with church get to that place because they discover...usually slowly...that their experience of church doesn't deliver what they thought it was supposed to...that after they jumped in and worked hard to help the church achieve its mission...it proved to be an underwhelming experience.

Sometimes because the change in the community that people expected to see didn't happen.

Sometimes because the influence they expected the church to be able to have didn't make much of an impact.

Sometimes because the personal transformation they expected by being a part of the church just didn't end up feeling a whole lot different.

I've known people – in this church and in others – who have had things unravel for them related to their faith.

The lioness of a woman who finally grew so frustrated by her perceived lack of courage on the part of the church (and its pastors) that she walled herself off from it and found another outlet for trying to make change.

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The young adult who joined the community because he felt drawn to a place that talked of authenticity and vulnerability but then drifted away because he never found it.

The long-serving leader who never understood why others wouldn't volunteer as many hours as she did and finally withdrew in herself and stopped participating in the programs she once helped make happen.

“But we had hoped...”

Sadly, it's a refrain I've heard more than a few times in my 21 years of pastoral ministry.

Sometimes people get to that place where their hope for the church and for the faith is in the past tense; when they have given up on it.

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This is not a sermon to stand up for the church around the places where people have become disillusioned with it – or to try to explain the reasons away.

This might be hard to hear or accept, but the church – even our church – will continue to be a place that leads some to become disillusioned. That's not our goal – of course – and it is certainly something we want to avoid...but it is inevitable as the church is a human institution that tries to be about a divine purpose.

As I said last week, when we are faced with the ways we disappoint people...and, to a greater degree...with the ways we are the cause for some to have so much disappointment that they become disillusioned...it is an occasion for us to reflect, learn, and respond...not out of defensiveness, but with grace.

It is also an opportunity for us to remember that the church isn't perfect.

And that the church is not going to be able to meet the expectations of those who are a part of it – even our own. Because the church is made up of people who – even on our best days, are broken and bruised and unable to carry the weight of God's promises on our own.

All of which is why the Church has a savior.

Who meets us on the road when hope feels like a memory.

Who reminds us of a story of a people who God blessed, repeatedly.

Who shows up in the everyday, unscripted moments – like when bread and broken and tables are shared.

Whose love for us is beyond resilient – in spite of the ways we so often rebel, or fail to appreciate, or half-heartedly acknowledge in ways that we think will make us even.

Jesus reminds us where to focus our belief...our trust...and our hope: Not in the well-meaning but imperfect vessel that God uses to carry out God's mission...but in the one who gives the Church its name and its purpose.

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The one who lived and died and was raised for our sake – and for the sake of the world.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.