

23 April 2023, Third Sunday of Easter (A)

Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church

Carly Lane, Lay Chaplain

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

In a past life I served as the director of children's and youth ministries at an Episcopal Church in Kentucky. I want to tell you a story about a kid there named Pierce. (And I want to be clear—this is not our Pierce at Thankful. Different Pierce.)

Pierce was seven when I met him—highly intelligent, highly sensitive, prone to bouts of tearfulness. One evening as we entered our children's ministry space, Pierce discovered that a clay cross he had made the week prior had cracked as it dried and was now not a cross at all, but so many fragments.

Pierce's grief was overwhelming. It was overwhelming for him, but also for the other children, my adult helpers, and me. We leapt into action, trying to fix and make right: We would glue it! We would tape it! We would glom it together with blobs of fresh clay!

Alas: the glue didn't hold; the tape didn't stick; the blobs of fresh clay didn't adhere to the dry clay. With every failure, Pierce's sorrow intensified. Eventually—though Pierce was uncomfortable, the problem unsolved—we had to move on.

At the end of our lesson, Pierce approached me. He was still holding his broken

cross, but now with sober composure. “Miss Carly: I was thinking. When my cross broke I thought it was a bad thing, but then I remembered that Jesus was killed on the cross. So the cross was a bad thing. And maybe if a bad thing breaks, that’s a good thing. Maybe when Jesus rises from the dead, the cross breaks. See?”

Oh now I see.

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The story in today’s Gospel reading is an old story. And it’s a story that never gets old; a story that is always new.

- We were expecting God; what we got was a baby.
- We were expecting a respectable teacher; here he is breaking bread with prostitutes, tax collectors, strangers, and the poor.
- We were expecting a mighty warrior prince; so much for the white horse, this guy rides into Jerusalem on a donkey.
- We had hoped he would be a Moses for our time, a great liberator, but watch as he is taken captive, stripped naked, and nailed to a cross.

As the disciples traveling to Emmaus put it: ‘We had hoped Jesus of Nazareth was the one to redeem us—to ransom us from the tyranny of Rome and reestablish the kingdom of Israel,’ and, but . . .

This old and ever-new story God keeps telling (with us, through us) is a story of holy irony. Our expectations are dashed—and, but—dashed in such a way that even in our grief we are invited to see what God is offering us *instead* as better than what we had hoped for. We are invited to consider that if our expectations

had been fulfilled on our own terms, our deepest needs and desires would somehow remain unanswered. Instead, our deepest needs and desires are answered by what God offers us—slantwise our expectations, on his terms: this baby, this oddball rabbi with his scandalous dinner parties, this crucified king.

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In the case of Pierce and his broken cross my instinct was to say, "*Quick let me fix it.*" But that's not what God was doing in that moment at all. And what God was doing in the moment was so much stranger and more beautiful and more important than anything I could have known to hope for.

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There are some big things happening in our life as a parish family right now. After over a decade with her as our beloved priest and pastor, we are saying goodbye to Mother Leyla and her family. Though our Vestry is in close conversation with the Diocese, and working tirelessly to ensure a healthy transition, it's not clear when we will be able to call our next rector, or who, beyond Father Rob, will serve at our altar in the interim.

A month after Mother Leyla leaves, we'll be saying goodbye to our beloved organist Sheryl, and welcoming a new organist, Gabriel, to the bench.

We have a new roof, and a newly repointed church building. We are soon to begin work on our long-nurtured dream of renovating the undercroft.

We are about to embark on a series of one-on-one conversations designed to ensure that we all have a voice in Thankful's next chapter (you'll hear more about those from Tom next month). And as of this week we are in conversation with

several prospective community partners about what space-sharing in the Parish Hall basement might look like . . .

I don't think that we as a parish family are in the grip of Good Friday's despair. Not at all. But perhaps on this third Sunday of Easter we are in the grip of something like the grief and uncertainty that these two friends of Jesus are feeling on their way to Emmaus.

Christ has died, but the tomb is empty; some women from our group had visions of angels who said he was alive . . .

Lord, we have faith that you are at work in the life of this parish family, AND our hearts are heavy, our vision is cloudy; it's not clear to us what exactly you're doing here.

One of the things our gospel story emphasizes for us is the risen Christ's patience with us in our sadness and confusion.

Sure his initial response is a bit harsh, "How foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared," but it's not like he leaves his friends there. No, he walks with them, and talks with them, and teaches them in such a way that they can hear the prophets' declarations with new ears.

By reinterpreting scripture for them, the unrecognized risen Christ offers his disciples the tools they need to begin to interpret and make sense of what they have just experienced in his death, in his empty tomb, and in the women's angelic vision.

And all of this lays the groundwork for the moment in which it looks like they are about to part ways except that the disciples say, “Stay with us” and the risen Christ stays. He sits at their table, takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it, and in that gesture is suddenly legible to the disciples as himself. The scales fall from their eyes. They see clearly now: *Oh now I see* The Lord has risen indeed!

The risen Christ has revealed himself, and is revealing himself, and will continue to reveal himself to us in new and surprising ways. It’s okay that we carry grief and uncertainty with us on this road that we’re walking together.

In listening to one another and to those around us, in our faithful attempts to read the scripture with new eyes, to hear God’s word with new ears, in our extensions of hospitality, in our prayerful invitation to the Holy Spirit to ‘Stay with us,’ and in the sharing of the eucharist (take, bless, break, give) we open ourselves up to that holy irony whereby Christ will reveal himself here in our midst.

Amen