

My family and I spent a few days near Acadia National Park and, one morning, I woke up early to hike up Mt. Champlain (it's really just a big hill) by myself. When I started, I could see where I wanted to go but, about halfway up, I lost the trail. I would tell you I was lost, but Martha always says I have a bad sense of direction and I don't want to encourage her! But I was lost and asked myself the question "Where do I go from here?" Walk blindly ahead and hope for the best? Quit and head back down? I didn't like either of those options. So, what I did instead was look back at where I'd come from to get a sense of where I was, took stock of what was available to me to help me find my way, which was a map, landmarks ahead of me, and the markings they sometimes put on the ground, and used that to figure out how to go forward. I found the trail and ultimately reached my destination.

As we leave 2020, we may be having the same experience. Many of us step into 2021 disoriented, looking for the trail, and asking, "Where do we go from here?" We're asking that question about careers, relationships, school, finances, and we're also asking that question as a church. That's what I hope to answer this morning. We are going to look how God met his disciples on another road of discouragement and through it, we'll take a look back at where we've come from, be honest about where we find ourselves today, and remember what God has makes available to us that will help us reach the destination he has for us. My prayer is you leave today not only with some clarity, but more importantly, an abundance of hope.

**[Luke 24:13-24] <sup>13</sup> That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. <sup>16</sup> But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup> And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup> Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" <sup>19</sup> And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. <sup>21</sup> 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 happened. <sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, <sup>23</sup> and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup> Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."**

This scene is immediately after the women return from the empty tomb. It's possible these two disciples had had enough, and left Jerusalem confused and hurting, with their hopes and expectations in Jesus seemingly dashed. They were asking the question "Where do we go from here?" Jesus approached them and asked what they are discussing. **Trials have a way of revealing what we believe and perceive.** Jesus is, in a way, testing them to see what all they understand to have happened the last three days. Their response was stillness and sadness. They recounted their belief of who Jesus is and their grief that all appeared hopeless.

Many of us ended last year standing still and looking sad. The idea of looking back and recounting what has brought us to this day seems a bit superfluous, if not cruel. But defining reality is always an important step as we begin a new year. Pandemic, racial and political divisions, economic uncertainty, fatigue, malaise, increasing anxiety, and Zoom neck has impacted us all, and it's not like turning the calendar makes it all go away. Additionally, it's been a challenging year for the American church. Many leaned into their faith in the last year, but many also opted out. Barna says 22% of all churchgoing adults, and 50% of churchgoing Millennials, stopped attending. 53% of all US adults say they never went to church in 2020, up from only 14% in 2019. That's a huge jump. Most pastors I talk to and read say they are not really sure who is a part of their church right now, and we have experienced the same. Our congregation has contracted, though we're not sure by how many. We go into 2021 with fewer people and fewer funds (but I'm so grateful for your generosity) than we had going into 2020. For all those reasons, it's understandable if we stand still and feel sad, and we should be asking the question "Where do we go from here?" Do we march forward blindly? Do tap out and quit? No way.

As long as Jesus reigns, his Spirit is still being poured out, and he hasn't returned, we still have work to do and places to go. Remember, the Church began in a world that was indifferent or hostile to it, and the Gospel spread from 120 believers in an upper room in Jerusalem to the center of power in Rome in 30 years. **God is not done yet**, and he has somewhere he wants to take us. We see where we've come from, but what does God give us in this moment to help us navigate our way?

**On the road of discouragement, God's presence and Word are always available.**

We are not alone as we step into 2021. We have a loving guide and a perfect guidebook with us.

**[Luke 24:25-27, 30-32] <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself...<sup>30</sup> When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"**

During what must have been one of the greatest Bible study groups of all time, Jesus shows them what God's Word says and how it all pointed to him and the events of the last three days. Their understanding and expectations needed to be refined. What happened to Jesus was not a mistake. It was the unfolding of the perfect plan of salvation God devised in eternity past. **He was in control the entire time.** Jesus explains this like a winning coach at a post-game press conference talking about how the game plan worked to perfection. And then, over a shared meal, their eyes were opened, and they recognized who he was, and their hope was renewed. It would have been easy for Jesus to have immediately said "Hey guys, it's Jesus." But he wanted them to know him as the fulfillment of Scripture because the more we know about Jesus biblically, the more we love him relationally.

It should be no surprise that we start here. I imagine Jesus is asking us what he asked these two: What things are we talking and thinking about? **Do our expectations align with Scripture, what it says about who God is, what he is doing, and how we are to view the world?** Do we look at last year as a one-off, or as a stark reminder of the true condition of the world? If hindsight is 2020, last year shows us what the Bible declares over and over. The world is broken. But we are not without hope because Scripture also declares Jesus has overcome the world. He wants to remind us of that as we step into the new year.

Like these two, I believe the first thing all of us need to do this year is **invite Jesus in**. When I read that Jesus caused their heart to burn (not heartburn!) I knew immediately that's what I need. As I told you last week, God showed me how the stresses and difficulty of the last three years caused me to barricade my heart. It helped me persevere, but it shut down an essential part of me that I need Jesus to renew. Jesus wants to be close to you, cast out your fear with his perfect love, and guide you through his Word. Open the door and let him in.

**On the road of discouragement, God's redemptive grace is always at work.**  
God doesn't let anything go to waste.

**[Luke 24:36-39, 42-45] <sup>36</sup> As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" <sup>37</sup> But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see... <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate before them. <sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.**

I said last week that if Jesus is alive, that changes everything. He appears again to a group of his closest friends in what is a moment of gracious assurance that God is still at work and still in control. He proves he is risen and offers them peace, **because wherever Jesus is, peace is possible**. Then he uses Scripture to show how the most horrific event in history, Christ's crucifixion, was used by God to glorify himself, accomplish his will, and bless mankind.

Now, the suffering of Jesus and the events of 2020 are not the same. One paid the penalty for sin. The other is a result of sin. But both can appear hopeless without the grace of God. I believe Jesus wants to tell us what he told the: "Peace. I can use a cross and tomb and I can use this last year to accomplish my purposes and bless you."

If you are a Christ follower and asking, "Where do we go from here?", part of the answer is to recognize **your life is not defined and limited by circumstances, but by what God does in and through those circumstances**. Imagine how encouraging it would be if we start 2021 by looking back to see how God was at work in 2020. I have heard so many stories of more time with family, the breaking of bad habits, the start of good ones, learning something new, or growing relationships with Christ. I had a wonderful email exchange with someone in our church

who has really leaned into Jesus and declared “Hope is just about my favorite word.” For me, God has grown my faith and dependence on him. What has it been for you?

I want you to see the way God worked in and through us over the past year. 185 discovered their God-given purpose, part of the 420 who grew through a Training Experience. 381 first-time connections. Six baptisms in just the last few months (and more to come next week!) 4,513 experienced the love of Christ through our Causes. That doesn't include the stories of love and care I heard about in our Life Groups. God does not let anything go to waste, and this is evidence of it. In fact, if 2020 had been a normal year, it's likely some of these things would never have happened. Spend time celebrating and thanking him for what he's done so we can look forward to what he is going to do.

**On the road of discouragement, God's mission of renewal is always in motion.**

If Jesus is alive, we have something to live for.

**[Luke 24:46-49] <sup>46</sup> And said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”**

Jesus finished all the Father sent him to do, making possible the forgiveness of sins and a renewed relationship with God for all who repent and turn to him in faith. But that opportunity for renewal needed to be broadcast all over the world. How would Jesus accomplish this? Through his successors. He had been preparing them for this throughout his life, and now commissions them to take it from here. He calls them witnesses because they have been with him, seen him risen, and will be sent to take this good news to the rest of the world, and God will pour out his Spirit on them to empower their work.

Where do we go from here? We **accept Jesus' invitation to go** and live out that same mission. We do that by calling each other to live out our God given purpose in Christ every day, and fulfilling the vision God has for our church to be a starting place, a training and launching ground for someone to discover and live out their God-given purpose, a people so full of unmistakable and irresistible joy that God would use us to awaken this city to him and invite others into the adventure God has for them. That, at the end of 2021, the city of Dallas will be better off because we are in it.

I want to let you know of a few things that I believe will get us there. First, we will start a series in the book of Acts next Sunday. It is Luke's second volume, showing the triumphant march of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. It is the story of the first century church, and I pray that our hearts will be renewed as we see who we were always meant to be and what God created us to do.

Additionally, as I mentioned last year, we are transitioning 20% of all staff time to one-on-one, relational discipleship. For too long the American evangelical church defined success by the number of people who showed up, so we spent all our staff time trying to fill seats. Programs are

important, and can help people grow, but the Gospel ultimately travels at the speed of relationship, and as Luke showed us throughout his Gospel, there are some things that happen one-on-one that can't happen any other way. We believe success is ultimately measured by successors, and are praying this becomes catalytic to our culture, increases the depth of our discipleship, and leads us to the day where we each of us are pouring into someone else.

I invite you to be all in here. The more vocal we are about this being our church, the more others are given comfort and confidence that God's people are here, devoted to one another, and eager to live out the mission he's given us. If you'd like to make that formal, we will have a covenant gathering on Sunday, January 17, and it will be preceded by an opportunity to become a covenant member. Additionally, discover your God-given purpose if you don't know it yet. I met with a young lady from our church a couple of months ago who asked me to process a monumental decision she was considering. It was so big she jokingly asked me to confirm that she was crazy to consider it. But, as we processed it through her Two Words, it started to make a whole lot of sense why she was interested. God made you on purpose for a purpose. Find out what it is!

But more than that, I want us to begin this year seeing the Gospel opportunity 2020 has presented us. In the second, third, and fourth centuries, the Antonine Plague, Plague of Cyprian, and Plague of Justinian wiped out a large percentage of the world's population, but Christianity grew, sometimes exponentially, during those times. Why? Because a people deeply in love with the Lord, devoted to one another, and on mission together will change the world. And what was true centuries ago is still true today. We live in a disrupted world looking for hope, and we have that hope. So we may have fewer people, but I believe those who are left are deeply committed to God's mission and want to make a difference in the name of Christ.

"Where do we go from here?" Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus blessing his disciples and ascending to heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. He claimed it would happen, was crucified for it, but is vindicated as the Messiah. And Luke tells us his followers return worshipping the Lord, rejoicing, and meeting together as they prepare to be sent out. I do not know what 2021 will bring, but I do know that can be true of us, and if that's true of us, God will use us.