Grace to you and peace from Jesus Christ, our risen Savior. Amen.

Seven miles west of Jerusalem there’s a little town called Abu Ghosh. Its population is just under 8,000, and it’s known for producing some of the best hummus in the world. Abu Ghosh is a Muslim town, and it’s home to one of the largest mosques in Israel.

It’s also home to a 12th century chapel built by Crusaders who thought they’d located the biblical town of Emmaus, which isn’t an actual town that can be found on any map or in any historical writings. Nobody knows where Emmaus actually was, but the word Emmaus means hot spring and this Crusader chapel is built right over an ancient hot spring in the middle of the town of Abu Ghosh. The chapel is enclosed within a Benedictine monastery known as St. Mary of the Resurrection, where a couple dozen monks and nuns live and pray and make bread and tend the garden and receive visitors and make homemade Limoncello to sell in their gift shop.

This monastery is where I found myself about a year ago, with a group of Christian journalists who were on a weeklong trip to Israel. It was our last day in the country; we were flying out of Tel Aviv late that evening, and we’d planned to spend that day down at the border with Gaza, talking to both Jews and Muslims about what it’s like to live in such a politically contested area. Our plans were foiled by three rockets that had been launched toward Tel Aviv from Gaza the afternoon before and 100 rockets that Israel had fired back overnight in retaliation. Nobody was killed in the rocket attacks, but it was no longer safe for us to be anywhere near Gaza.

So we woke up that morning of our last day in Israel and learned that instead we’d be visiting two sites that are associated with the biblical story of Emmaus, one of which was St. Mary of the Resurrection monastery. And there we met with Brother Olivier, who sat down with us next to the underground spring which doubles as a baptismal font, and told us about the peacemaking training sessions he holds on the monastery grounds for groups of young Israeli soldiers, and took us into the larger part of the chapel where he showed us the 12th century frescoes on the walls and sang a Psalm to us in Hebrew.¹

And I think it’s safe to say that all our hearts were burning within us as Brother Olivier sang, not because we mistook him for Jesus but because the sound of his voice in that very old, very large, nearly empty church drew us into communion with everyone who had sat in that space before us and everyone who would visit after us. In that moment, the risen Christ was very much alive and in our midst.

You may be wondering what any of this has to do with our current situation, when nobody is allowed to get on an airplane or visit a monastery. These days the road to Emmaus may be only as long as the path from your sofa to your refrigerator. Or maybe for you the road to Emmaus has become paved with life-threatening danger but there’s no way for you to avoid it because you’re an essential worker. Or maybe the road to Emmaus is a nice story but you really don’t have time to think about it right now because you’ve just lost your job and you need to figure out how you’re going to get health insurance. Or maybe the road to Emmaus hurts to think about because any story about people having a meal together reminds you that you’re now eating all your meals alone.

¹ You can watch a clip of Brother Olivier singing in Hebrew to visitors in the monastery chapel here.
You may be in one of those categories or you may be in a different one, but no matter what your circumstances this morning it’s likely that they’re very different than they were the last time you heard this story on a Sunday morning and imagined yourself as one of those disciples who walked along the road with that stranger who told you about the scriptures and then you invited him in and shared a meal with him, and only after he took the bread and blessed it and broke it did you realize that he was the risen Christ. And then he mysteriously slipped away—and you were left only with the memory of a burning heart, and a rush of wind lingering after he disappeared, and a distant longing tinged with the hope that you might someday meet him again.

There’s so much emotion in this story of Jesus appearing to the disciples and traveling with them to Emmaus. There’s so much grief (because remember, until the moment Jesus disappears from the table after breaking bread, the disciples think he’s dead). There’s so much surprise (both the subtle, only-recognized-later surprise at the way he explains the scriptures for them on the road and the sudden life-changing astonishment of that moment when he breaks the bread, revealing himself to be the risen Christ). There’s so much disappointment (disappointment over the future plans and dreams that the crucifixion has unexpectedly shattered, and very likely when Jesus disappears disappointment in themselves for not recognizing him sooner).

We are not so unlike those disciples. Grief, surprise, disappointment: these are feelings most of us can probably relate to right now. The part of the story that speaks most clearly to us today may be in the way the disciples respond after Jesus disappears. What do they do in those first moments of unexpected aloneness?

They do a few things. First, they reflect on what just happened. “Was not our heart burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” they ask each other. Our translation is different; it says “were not our hearts burning within us?” But in the Greek, it’s actually in the singular: “Was not our heart burning within us?” It’s like they’re acknowledging that when Christ is present our individual hearts are somehow bound together into one collective heart. They’re also acknowledging that the presence of God’s grace in a particular situation can sometimes only be recognized in retrospect.

Might our individual hearts be burning together even when we can’t gather together physically for word and sacrament? In these moments when we can’t literally taste the body and blood of Christ, might there still be a fiery grace in our virtual gathering that will emerge in more palpable ways as the future unfolds?

The second thing the disciples do is to go and share the good news. “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem,” Luke tells us, “and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has 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.”

This is astounding to me. Remember that it was evening, and the day was almost over. They’d invited their guest to stay the night with them, most likely because the road between Emmaus and Jerusalem wasn’t safe to travel at night. But once they realize that Christ has risen from the dead, so great was their shared joy and astonishment and puzzlement that they couldn’t help themselves: they got back on the road, dangerous as it was, and returned to Jerusalem so they could share the good news.
Might there be ways in which God is now calling us to retrace our steps in the midst of the dangers we currently face? Are there ways it might be fruitful for us to reverse course and do things differently? If so, might those decisions be our own way of reflecting the good news of Christ’s resurrection to a world that even before the pandemic was deeply in need of good news (and also deeply in need of some restructuring)?

I’ve thought about Brother Olivier a lot this past week. I don’t know if he’s even still alive: he’d been struggling with some serious health issues when I met him, and I have no idea how hard Abu Ghosh has been hit by the coronavirus or whether it has yet gotten within the walls of the monastery. I do know that the song he sang for us that day is still resonating for me, even across thousands of miles. I pray for him, just as I’m now praying for all of you. And I try also to trust the words that I saw posted on the side of a building outside of the monastery: “Emmaus brings us an everlasting message. With Jesus, not suffering but joy is the final outcome, for just as Jesus drew near to the grief-stricken disciples and transformed their sorrow into love and joy, He will do the same today.”

Amen.