

April 30, 2017 – Third Sunday of Easter  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 24:13-35, Psalm 116

### **How to Sing Psalm 116, and When**

It is still Easter Sunday. Now I know in some ways, Easter is a long time ago. I recently opened my fridge and saw a pastel-colored, hard-boiled egg, and I thought, I better not eat that, that was a couple weeks ago.

But it is still Easter Sunday. It's still Easter Sunday in today's gospel. Today's gospel story begins on the very first Easter Sunday, begins "on that same day when Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene." It's that first Easter Sunday, now nearing evening, and two disciples are walking down a road, walking and talking about all that has happened; discussing it with one another, and with a stranger who joins them. It is not a cheerful conversation. It has nothing do with baskets and bunnies and chocolates. It is a conversation of sorrow, and disappointment, confusion, incredulity. "Are you the only one who doesn't know what happened?" the travelers say to the stranger. And then they say what happened, how a person named Jesus, of Nazareth, was crucified. And then they say this: "But we had hoped that he was the one..." Is there any sadder phrase, the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor asks, is there any sadder phrase in the English language than this: "But we had hoped..." It is Easter Sunday evening and on the road to Emmaus the sun is setting on the horizon—as is hope.

I was thinking of this as I remembered last week's gospel, the story of Doubting Thomas. That story also begins on Easter Sunday evening. In it as well the day is dimmed with doubt, the disciples' minds are shrouded, their hearts both heavy and frail. These shared qualities of these Easter Sunday stories, the tear-blurred tone, the fear and fragility stood out to me—last week, and this week, too. For all that Lent has ended, and the trees are flocking out and the tulips in full bloom, the school year and seasonal projects reaching fruition, amidst all that would announce joy and vitality and achievement, I've been feeling a heightened awareness of how vulnerable life is—and how precious.

I've been feeling this as I think of a number of people in our congregation who are going through hard things health-wise, people who are walking down a long road, having difficult conversations, who are no strangers to uncertainty and sadness. And then it was on Easter Monday that my mom called to say that instead of coming down to visit, together with my dad, she was with him in the hospital, he had to have some things checked out on his heart. He's okay, but they have to make some changes in how they live, what they eat, and it hit me in the heart, as we were conversing, recounting what happened, like those travelers on the road.

And then there is the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 116, with this verse that we just sang: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his servants." It's a beautiful verse, a comfort to many—many commit it to memory. I love it, too, I have a memory of being a child and hearing my mom reciting it, but I can never read it now without remembering two seminary classmates, a pastor couple, who were a few years ahead of me. They had a child, Helena, who was born with a heart condition—a serious heart condition, but, they were told, they had hoped, medically manageable. And then, when Helena was but a toddler, one of the follow-up surgeries went wrong. In the days of mourning that followed, in one of the chapel services at the seminary Psalm 116 was appointed. It was just this time of year. Our Old Testament professor preached, preaching to people who could barely see through the pain. He pointed out this verse, "Precious

in the sight of the Lord...” but he did not offer platitudes. Instead he noted how “precious” only captures part of the meaning of the word scripture uses here. In the original language of the Old Testament, another aspect of what the Bible says about vulnerable lives, another translation of the word that is often rendered “precious” is “costly.” “Costly in the sight of the Lord, is the death of his servants.” God knows about costly, as the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “Grace is costly.” Bonhoeffer says that God’s love for us “is costly because it costs a man his life ... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.”

Jesus embodies costly grace. In Jesus, God came to this fragile world, in fragile form; God came as a human being, whom human beings killed. The night before that, the night before he died, Jesus met with his disciples. They met over a meal. The gospel of Luke tells us that it was a Passover meal, and so, according to Passover ritual, Jesus would have sung Jewish songs—psalms—including the one we just sang: One of the psalms appointed for Passover is Psalm 116. Jesus would have sung it the night before he died, knowing he was going to die. Jesus would have sung about the cords of death, the anguish of the grave, grief and sorrow. And Jesus would have also sing this, “I will lift the cup of salvation.” That’s what Jesus sang the night of his last supper. Jesus sang, “I will lift the cup of salvation.”

We sing that here as well. As a visitor to our congregation noted to me, we sing a lot. Even when there is no music, we sing. We sing “I will lift the cup of salvation,” when we pray for people who are walking down long roads, walking with them as we pray. We sing “I will lift the cup of salvation,” when precious children come first to the communion table, watch how they walk with a song in their step. We sing “I will lift the cup of salvation,” when new members stand before us and pledge to walk with Jesus. In each of these ways and more, with our fragile selves, we sing, “I will lift the cup of salvation.” And when we meet someone who is sad and confused, who needs to tell us about all that has happened, when we listen to them, we sing, “I will lift the cup of salvation.” And when we offer hospitality, when we welcome a stranger, we sing: “I will lift the cup of salvation.” And when we share food with people who are hungry, in our homes, on the streets, across the world, we sing, “I will lift the cup of salvation.” And when we go and tell others of what we have seen, we sing, “I will lift the cup of salvation.”

On the night before he died, the night he instituted Holy Communion, Jesus sang, “I will lift the cup of salvation.” In the mystery of the sacrament we sing it with him, united with him and with all who have died, children of God of every age. We eat with them here, with the promise that we will eat with them again.

But now we are on the road. As on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus met with travelers, and explained to them the scriptures, and broke bread with them, and moved them to go and tell. So also today, on life’s road we meet together, and hear the scriptures, and share bread, and are sent to proclaim. Gather, Word, Meal, Send. Every Sunday is Emmaus. Every Sunday is Easter. Alleluia and Amen.