After a month of practicing physical distancing, the urge to go places for some variety and face to face interactions with other human beings becomes ever more pronounced. People are beginning to rebel against the restrictions for social, psychological, and economic reasons.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A contemporary twist on the Emmaus story could be written this way:

A couple is strolling on the beach happy to stretch their legs and take in some fresh air after a full month of being secluded at home. They seem to be rather animated in their conversation when a young man with a face mask approaches them, clearly intent at ignoring the six-feet physical distancing guideline. As he invades their space, they share a look of concern with him. The young man openly disregards their anxiety and boldly asks them what they are talking about on their way. They are stunned at the question.

“Why, are you the only tourist in Florida who hasn’t heard about the COVID-19 pandemic?” One inquires with remarkable worry in his eyes. “What’s COVID-19?” The young man quickly replies. “It’s a catastrophic global pandemic not to be taken lightly.” The other matter-of-factly offers. “Then,” the young man observes, “it’s not safe for you or those in your vicinity to be strolling about. You will show you care by obeying the guidelines. In your acts of love, you will see me. Go home and tell your friends to stay there. This too shall pass.”

The Emmaus passage is a jewel of Lukan insights for the Church. It happens on the road like so many other important events that Luke reports in the gospel as well as in his second book, the Acts of Apostles. In fact, the gospel opens with Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem preparing for the birth of the Messiah. It is on a road that the story of the Good Samaritan develops. There is much drama on the road as the “prodigal son” returns to his father. In his final strategic moments, Jesus teaches and heals on his way to Jerusalem. On the road to Damascus, Paul encounters the risen Lord.

A number of Lukan themes are woven together in this narrative: hospitality, table fellowship, faithfulness, discipleship. The scene on this road predicts the future of Christ’s church as Luke understands it. This will be a church on the move, sent out by a Jesus who walks alongside us even when we don’t recognize him. To Luke, being church together means openness to the presence of the other in total humility and vulnerability; readiness to invite the other to the table; openness to what the other has to offer; commitment to stewardship of resources; generous hospitality and mutual companionship.

As the story approaches the end, Jesus transitions from being the guest to being the host. The disciples have not recognized him so far even though their hearts are warming up to him. It’s when he blesses and breaks bread that their eyes open. They have not recognized him all along: his voice, his way of walking, his mannerism, even his eyes have not given him away. They haven’t recognized the passion in his teaching as he explained them the Scriptures. But now he does something that is distinctly his, a gesture that symbolizes the meaning of his birth among us, his life of dedication to the Father, his generous availability to give it all for love of those the Father has entrusted him. The taking, the blessing, and the braking, actions that speak of a decision to be for others matured of a pious connection with the will of God and a clear and prophetic awareness that true love will produce life but not before embracing suffering.

In an article entitled “Striving for Justice and Peace” that appeared in the August 2019 issue of the Living Lutheran, there is a reference to the Prison Congregations of America ministry[[2]](#footnote-2) that ELCA pastor Ed Nessehluf started in the 1980s. The current executive director, Renae Griggs, who spent almost 15 years in law enforcement in Florida, where she was the first female SWAT officer and first female homicide detective in her department, made clear that when she was becoming a certified police officer, she spent 11 months working in a men’s jail. She became convinced that “crimes of violence do not happen in a vacuum and everyone has a story.” After she left law enforcement, she went to college to earn a master’s degree in forensic psychology.

As she started working with people convicted of homicide, she quickly realized that, in her own words, “no matter what technics we apply, the one thing that worked every time was when people got a dose of Jesus. Once they learned who they were in Christ and were able to receive the unconditional love of God and grace and mercy, it changed their lives.” During her prison experience, she found that “the absence of love traces through the many intersections contributing to violence. Where there is an absence of love, there is an oversupply of fear, and it drives everything...People respond from a dark place where love doesn’t exist or where they don’t recognize it. People in prison are desperate for God because they have lost everything else. They think what they have done is so bad that God can’t possibly love them. But when they see the blood of Jesus is indiscriminate and the cross really did take it all, no matter what, it changes things. And when you get around people who have been so hungry and thirsty for grace, and then find it, you can’t help but be moved and feel the Holy Spirit in that place. They are on fire because they didn’t think anyone could love them. The jubilation from the reconciliation can’t be put into words.” [[3]](#footnote-3) Could this be what the witnesses to the risen Lord experienced?

What sign of Jesus’ helps you to see him? What opens your eyes? To me it’s the grace of forgiveness that washes over me. That grace assures me that I am a beloved child of God and nothing can separate me from God. That grace also empowers me to be gracious with my neighbors, especially those who have injured me. Those who take in Jesus, bless his Word, and break it in chewable morsels for themselves and for the world through acts of mercy and compassion receive the forgiveness of sin and enjoy eternal life. This is how we become witnesses to the resurrection: not only are we the recipients of eternal life but we become willing instruments and humble channels of that very life. In other words, we are at the same time beneficiaries and benefactors, co-creators of the kingdom of heaven.

May the Lord God continue to bless us with Her divine Presence. Amen.

1. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-15/coronavirus-deaths-testing-protests> <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/489894-coronavirus-outbreak-raises-threats-to-mental-health> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.prisoncongregations.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Megan Brandsrud, Striving for Justice and Peace, Living Lutheran, August 2019, 16-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)