

Unexpected
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
April 19, 2026
The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

It's been another wild week in the news, as the political commentary once again attempted to reshape Christian theology for their own purposes. This week the current administration tried to explain to the POPE and Christians world-wide the core values of our own Holy Scriptures, reworked a Hollywood moment into a prayer for the armed forces, and our president strongly suggested that sees himself as the Messiah.

In the face of this insanity our Gospel reminds us of what Jesus is truly about, what Jesus values look like. And they look **nothing** like what the "powers that be" are embodying. First, let's note what our Gospel makes clear - Jesus is NOT about vengeance. The Risen Jesus doesn't appear in Jerusalem to seek vengeance on his persecutors, or to strike down those who murdered him. Nor does Jesus take this opportunity to stage a moment of dramatic propaganda, so often employed on our current political stage.

True to form in Luke's Gospel, Jesus appears to unexpected people in nowhere places. But then - this is a story of the completely unexpected happening. Jesus has risen, beyond anyone's capacity to believe, to take in fully. And here on the road to Emmaus, he walks with these two men, who had followed him during his ministry, and yet they don't recognize him.

This story always reminds me of my encounters with preschoolers in the local grocery store - and their stunned expressions when they recognize me out of context. And helping their parent explain that I actually exist beyond the walls of the church. I'm sure teachers experience this as well. When we are out of context, and out of our role - it's unexpected, and startling.

And while this moment on the road to Emmaus mimics these kinds of encounters, it's still a little puzzling to us. After all, as followers of Jesus, these men staked their lives on the idea that he was the Messiah, "the one to redeem Israel." And after spending months walking with Jesus and listening to him along roads just like this one — they still don't recognize him. He's right there, talking with them, walking beside them, and they don't realize it's him.¹

One explanation may lie in Cleopas's question to Jesus, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" The word he uses for stranger is *paroikeis*, literally "reside as a foreigner." Cleopas is describing Jesus as a "resident foreigner."²

So, not only doesn't Jesus seem to have any idea about what has just happened, but something about him comes across as an unfamiliar outsider. After walking with him for the day, and hearing Jesus explain the scriptures to them, they still don't recognize him.

When they arrive in Emmaus, night is falling, and the two disciples insist that this remarkable foreigner stay over with them before continuing on his journey. At supper, though he is their guest, not the host, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, and gives it to them — gestures that echo the Passover meal three nights earlier. Then, and only then, they recognize him.³

Earlier this week I read this blog post by retired Lutheran Pastor, Michael DeKraai.⁴

He writes:

Those traveling on the road to Emmaus were overcome with grief and disappointment. The death of one they believed to be the Messiah had killed their own dreams for the future. All they could see was death. It took familiar action on the part of Jesus to help them see beyond themselves.

Which brings us to today. Like the men walking on the road to Emmaus, we are often overcome with grief and disappointment. Currently we can add rage, fear, bewilderment, and general emotional upheaval at an extraordinary level - as a country, as a people.

As followers of Jesus, what do we do now?

The season of Easter is a season of looking for the risen Jesus - in unexpected places and in encounters with unexpected people. And as today's story reminds us, we might still miss him. Particularly if we have turned inward in our despair and disappointment. Our text encourages us to turn outward and look again. Look more deeply than appearances or situations - Jesus may already be there, right in front of us.

Friends, how will we recognize him? Our story suggests that the risen Jesus won't necessarily be in a form we'd anticipate; so we need to stay flexible and imaginative. Second, we need to pay attention not only with our eyes, but also with our hearts.⁵

The risen Jesus appears in ways that go beyond our preconceptions - and even, as our text is clear to point out, in the resident foreigner. (God is not subtle with us!)

But perhaps the most definitive way that we will know the risen Jesus is through the breaking of the bread. Jesus is known in the taking-blessing-breaking-giving at the table. He is made known, in other words, in a tangible act of love — in this case an act of mutual hospitality with a “resident foreigner” as night begins to fall.⁶

As one commentator describes it:⁷

“The breaking of the bread,” ... the mutually hospitable, eucharistic choreography through which we may recognize Jesus’ presence, is fundamentally the choreography of **exodus**: liberation from bondage, embarking on a new journey, stepping into a new life of intimate companionship with God.

Beloved fellow followers of Jesus, our Gospel urges us to look for the risen Jesus, in the **liberating choreography of love** - which can take all kinds of forms.⁸ When Jesus appears to these disciples on the road, he's teaching them a more expansive way of seeing him - focusing them and us - **on how he is embodied, spiritually and tangibly present**: wherever bread is broken and shared, and strangers are welcomed; wherever captives are set free, and peace is waged; wherever people stand up to oppression for the sake of justice, and the vulnerable are protected; wherever love knows no bounds.

Friends, **that's** what we do now, in the face of a broken world, we seek Jesus in unexpected places and people, and we embody overflowing love. And, at such a time as this, our expansive, intimate relationship with God pushes us into the public square. Because we know what God's justice requires, and what love demands of us. And our Scriptures are clear - God has a lot to say about: wages, prisons, borders, war, race, debt, and dignity.⁹ About how we, as Christians, live and move and have our being - together.

Beloved, **this is our lane**, let's reclaim it, in the name of God's love and justice. In the days ahead, may we find Jesus in unexpected people and places, and make God's love known in word and deed. Speaking up, and acting out with courage - one act of liberating love at a time. Amen.

Friends, the sermon is over, but our Bishop shared a letter with us on Thursday evening.

Bishop Doug wrote:

A Word to All the Faithful: Action is More Important Than Outrage¹⁰

Like many people of faith, I am personally outraged by statements made by the President in the last seven days. His threat to destroy “a whole civilization,” his disrespect for Pope Leo and his AI-generated blasphemy reveal something deeply troubling and beneath the dignity of the presidency and not reflective of the values of the American people.

Outrage is important emotional information, but what we do with it defines us. What we do next, how we continue to live out the mission of Jesus without fear or deceleration. This is what marks us as Christ’s own in the world.

It is easy for me to get lost in the absurdity of the next unbelievable sentence or social media post. What is harder, and more beneficial to my soul, is to do something to relieve the suffering of the victims of war, to use my voice as a citizen to reject the politics of chaos and the drumbeat of war, to give my time and energy to that which is of God.

In Acts of the Apostles, we are told how the followers of Jesus ordered their lives. It is helpful for us to revisit this text in Easter season especially, but whenever the events of our world derail us from the basic call to love one another.

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." - Acts 2:44-47

Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick and imprisoned. You know the list from Matthew 25 and the trifold mandate from the prophet Micah.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God? - Micah 6:8

Let us move beyond outrage to action. Bishop Mariann Budde reminds us that, “collective moral courage doesn’t arise on its own. It begins because someone goes first. Each of us can be that person. Whenever we tell the truth under pressure, look out for our neighbors, do something

hard for love's sake, forgive a mistake, choose dignity over contempt, and speak up when it would be safer to remain quiet, we make it easier for someone else to do the same."

Action needs to happen within the Church, as well. We can all reach out in love to a neighbor, a friend, or a family member who doesn't share our political perspective. As we pray for justice and peace, we should also pray for healing and reconciliation, for mutual forbearance and understanding. If we're ever going to come back from this time of division and brokenness, it's going to have to happen on the level of relationships with our neighbors, and the Church seems like the right place for that to start and deepen.

I am convinced that the power of the risen Christ is at work in us. And no one can stop the Jesus Movement from turning the nightmare into God's dream for us.

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¹ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

² Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

³ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

⁴ Rev. Michael DeKraai, "Road to Emmaus," Luther Seminary, God Pause, posted April 16, 2026

⁵ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

⁶ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

⁷ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

⁸ Breaking Bread: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3, April 13, 2026

⁹ The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, Stay Out of Politics?, Andrew Thayer Studio posted Apr 17, 2026

¹⁰ Bishop Douglas Fisher, A Word to All the Faithful: Action is More Important Than Outrage posted on April 16, 2026