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Sunday, Aug. 23, 2020
August Sermon Series: Values That Guide Us

Following Jesus is a Lifelong Journey
Jen Gruendler, Youth & Family Minister

John 19:38-42 NRSV

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

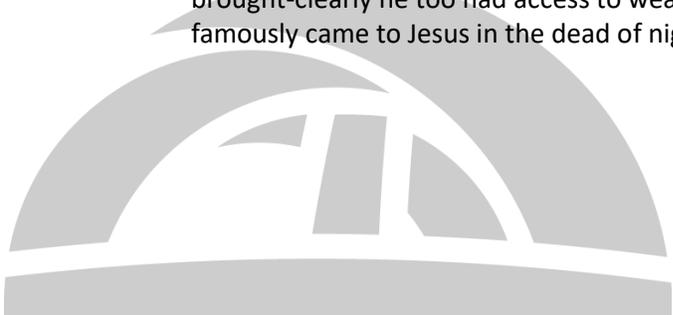
I wonder how their journeys started? What about Jesus captured their heart? Did they see a miracle in real time? Did they hear a firsthand testimony from a friend about this guy who is forgiving sins? Did they think that was going to be the last time they would ever see Jesus? Did they have any hope left? Where were they on Easter morning? Did they tell their grandchildren the story about when they cleaned and anointed the body of the son of God?

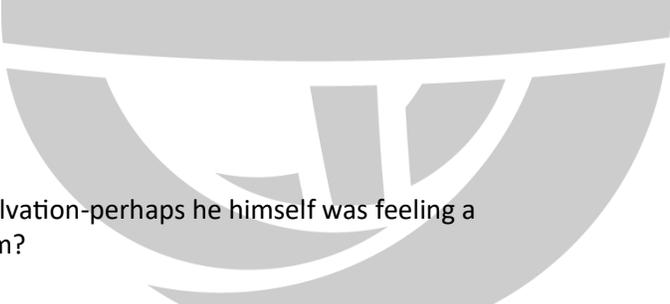
I mean they were just two guys-disciples of Jesus, named Joseph and Nicodemus.

These two disciples were not the Peters or Judas' or Mary's or Martha's of the bunch. They were seemingly more introverted and anxious and reserved than many of the others. They liked to stay on the periphery of the group-in secret. Perhaps their family would have rejected them if they hadn't, perhaps they were just the type of guys who wrestled with big ideas and had lots of questions but didn't need to be in the center of everything, and most certainly a more public faith in Jesus could have cost them their reputation and jobs and livelihood and maybe even life-so maybe it makes sense they traveled under the radar.

The text says Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple in secret. We can assume he was a man of means-after all he had a connection to Pilate and a tomb (perhaps his own he gave to Jesus) for a proper burial.

And we know Nicodemus, right? He was a Pharisee and given the amount of herbs and spices for the body he brought-clearly he too had access to wealth -he gave Jesus a burial fit for a king. Chapters earlier in John 3 he famously came to Jesus in the dead of night and all alone in secret, full of questions. He demanded to have a

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late-night theological conversation about spiritual rebirth and salvation-perhaps he himself was feeling a sense of rebirth since he had met Jesus and started following him?

These guys were not the most famous and front and center disciples...we know so little about them, so little about their story of following Jesus. Yet, right here in this most pivotal moment in this story of Jesus' life they show up. Did y'all catch where we are in the story –

Just before this moment in this story Jesus was arrested and killed on a cross and died.

And just after this moment is Easter when Jesus appears alive to Mary in this same garden mentioned in this text and then to the other disciples - it's Holy Saturday - the in between life and death day-and these two disciples who like to stay under the radar show up and tend to Jesus' body making sure he gets a proper and safe burial before sabbath.

They just showed up, offered what they had, and did what needed to be done.

I mean let's be real. Most of us don't have super miraculous following faith journeys. Most of us have ones instead full of a few mountain tops and deep wilderness valley's, some weird characters, and plenty of mistakes and painful seasons and of course lots of joy and growth too.

But, most of the time is just feels like we need show up and do what needs to be done to follow Jesus? It's the way things are, right?

Most of us know in the marrow of our bones that following Jesus is a lifelong journey- that we never fully arrive. It's not a onetime certificate that we can earn and be done with it.

I've heard my share of faith stories and I have yet to hear someone say something like-on August 23 my journey of following Jesus started and ended-because on that one day I figured it all out. I knew at that exact moment everything I needed to know about God and my life. That's just not how it goes, right?

It's why we have this core value at Zumbro- It tells us from the moment of our first breath to the moment we take our last Jesus just keeps inviting us to show up where he is at.

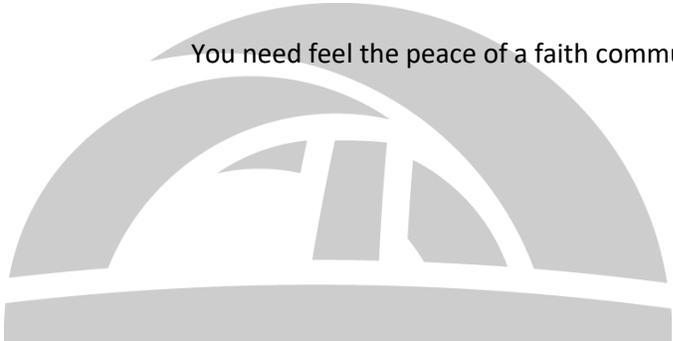
It reminds us that there is a season for everything and instructs us that there are many right ways of following Jesus. It reminds us that our journeys are so often both as complex and as mundane as we are.

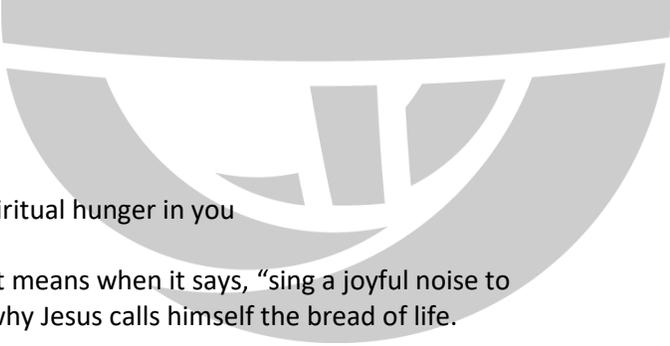
This core value assures us that each of has a story to tell about following Jesus regardless if we're 2 or 12 or 20 or 37 or 50 or 70 or 99.

Just as Pastor Jason said last week---we don't need more information about God and directions on how to exactly worship God correctly - instead we need to just worship God.

In the same way-you don't really need me to tell you that following Jesus is a lifelong journey- instead you need to experience and embody it yourself.

You need feel the peace of a faith community who shows up for you when life is awful.





You need to taste actual bread and wine and see how it fills a spiritual hunger in you

You need to sing in a choir or in worship so you can know what it means when it says, “sing a joyful noise to the Lord,” and you need to feed the hungry so you understand why Jesus calls himself the bread of life.

You need to confess your doubt and questions to someone you trust and to God too, so you know why Nicodemus showed up in the middle of the night at Jesus’ doorstep.

You need to feel the mighty embrace of a loving parent or partner or friend when you’re in pain to know what God’s grace feels like.

Following Jesus is something to be embodied. It asks us to move and be and taste and act and be vulnerable and to show up over and over again even when it seems like all hope is lost. Even on the Good Friday and Holy Saturday days.

So this morning, I am going to ask you some questions, they will invite your vulnerability and make you think about a bit of your own story of following Jesus - and we will wrestle together about how we have followed Jesus (or have tried to at least).... So that we can understand a bit more deeply why we have this core value and what it means for us to live into it...

So, Question 1: Where and why and when did you start following Jesus?

Maybe you, like so many who grew up in the mainline protestant or catholic church, were baptized as an infant. Your family brought you to the baptismal font before you even could speak or make any promises of your own. Maybe you have early early memories of Sunday school felt boards or Vacation Bible School videos or preschool chapel songs or youth group and memorizing the catechism in confirmation.

Perhaps you can’t even remember even deciding to follow Jesus-it was just something you do in the same way you breathe...

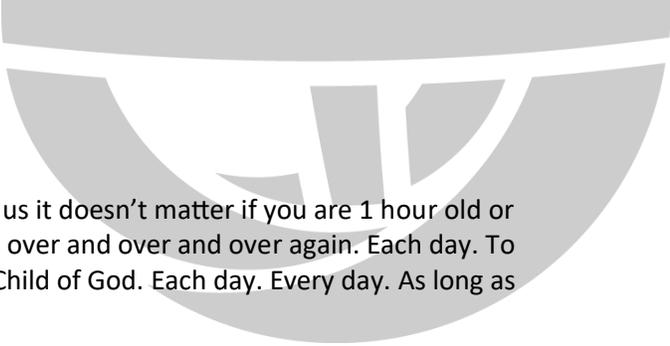
Some of us have different stories though, right?

For me, some would say on April 26, 1998 my following Jesus journey began (I would say it started earlier than that). Regardless, it was a beautiful spring Sunday morning, Confirmation day for most of my church friends -but for me-it was my baptism day at 15 years old-after all you cannot affirm the baptism you never had. So, that day my pastor -as I kneeled in front of the font - poured a whole lot of water over my head and ruined my hair, and with the church and my family and fellow confirmation class friends beside me-my sweet faith community welcomed me to the family of God in a new way.

So maybe you’re like me and joined the Jesus following party later in life-as a teenager or as a young adult or adult?

Maybe you feel like you did in fact decide to follow Jesus-as a conscious choice? Maybe you did drop some nets, left some stuff behind, and followed Jesus to new places and spaces. Maybe there was an experience or season of life or relationship that kick started in for you the first time or restarted it again?





The core value of “Following Jesus is a lifelong journey” reminds us it doesn’t matter if you are 1 hour old or 99 years old-the invitation to follow Jesus is one that comes to us over and over and over again. Each day. To show up. To restart. To be rebirthed. To affirm our identity as a Child of God. Each day. Every day. As long as we live.

Question 2? When has following Jesus felt like life and when has it felt like death for you? Remember, I said this would require some vulnerability.

Part of being a follower of Jesus is acknowledging that sometimes it’s really hard journey. And other times the journey is so full of joy it’s hard to put it to words. Both can be true.

Maybe the easy and joyful seasons of following Jesus were shaped by silly songs sung by Sunday school teachers, or mission trips to places near and far?

Maybe Jesus fills you with joy when you play an instrument or sing in a choir or roll burritos? Or maybe when you stretch your mind with scripture or a new book? Maybe your source of joy in faith has been being a parent or grandparent or in God’s beautiful creation at camp or in the peak of a mountain top when you’re quite sure you can touch heaven or when you dive into a lake and remember your baptism.

Maybe you have been filled with the joy of Jesus in the care of a small group or in the safety and love of a church family or in the work of justice in the world.

And, yes, you have probably had seasons where it felt like death too, right?

Wilderness seasons where you question everything. Times when you feel like Jesus didn’t show up when he needed to. Painful nights or months or years of the soul where your world is turned upside down or you’ve endured too much uncertainty and pain.

Maybe you, like the disciples before us, have denied, wandered or ran away, betrayed, hid, or even rejected the notion of Jesus. Maybe the church or someone who was a part of your faith journey has harmed you. Sometimes the journey- it feels like death.

This truth is why when churches and preachers say... if you just believe this way or do this exact thing or say this exact prayer all your problems will disappear or you never will experience any pain are so damaging. It’s simply not true and in my not so humble opinion bad theology.

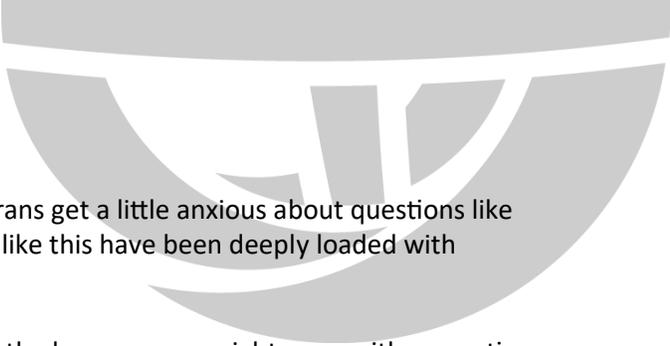
It’s why this core value is such a part of our DNA at Zumbro. Following Jesus- it’s messy and can be a bit of a roller-coaster.

But we claim -It’s not about a pie in the sky destination, but rather about the journey itself and the hard fact that at not one moment on the journey ever has Jesus left you.

So, when has your journey felt like life? Like Easter? Like joy? And when has it felt hard? Like spinning wheels? Like crucifixion? Like so much waiting for new life?

And lastly, where are you on the journey right now?





I'll be honest I get a little nervous asking this question - us Lutherans get a little anxious about questions like this, right? We get a little nervous because for so long questions like this have been deeply loaded with shame or unhealthy obligation or unhelpful guilt.

So, I invite you to push yourself a bit this morning beyond any of the baggage you might carry with a question like this and really dig deep-where are you on your journey right now? (knowing whatever the answer is Jesus adores you still)

Last night 20 Zumbro 10th graders got confirmed outside on the lawn-you're going to see their beautiful faces in a moment in a video. It was a confirmation service like no other- masks were worn, communion was had as a family group and even a puppy came. They made some promises to God to keep moving forward in faith. To keep following Jesus. To take a single step forward in their journey.

That's the invitation for all of us, right-one single step in the journey forward?

But before we do that we need to know where we're at?

If you're in deep in wilderness of doubt or pain or disorientation. Know Jesus is with you.

If you feel a stirring in you to try something new -to lean in with courage to follow Jesus in a new way-Know Jesus gives us guts to do that.

If you are wandering around and have really no idea where you are at-know Jesus is there too, so slow down, and invite others to listen with you. You will find a way forward.

Perhaps maybe even this pandemic season gives you space to try something new in your faith life and to follow Jesus in a new way.

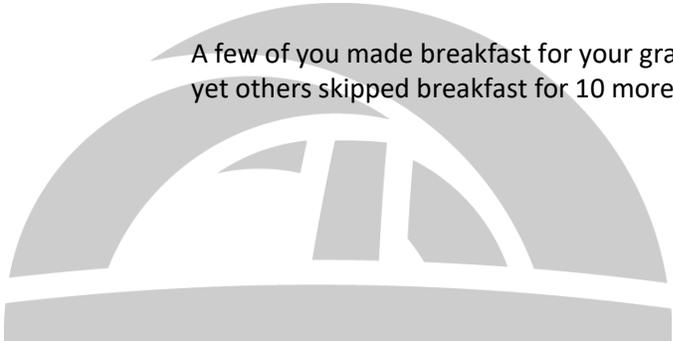
My guess it took Joseph and Nicodemus every bit of courage they had in them to ask Pilot for Jesus' body, to remove his dead body from the cross, to wash and anoint their friend, and to lay him to rest in the tomb. These were disciples who followed Jesus secretly and yet they showed up where Jesus was at and followed him that day in a new way.

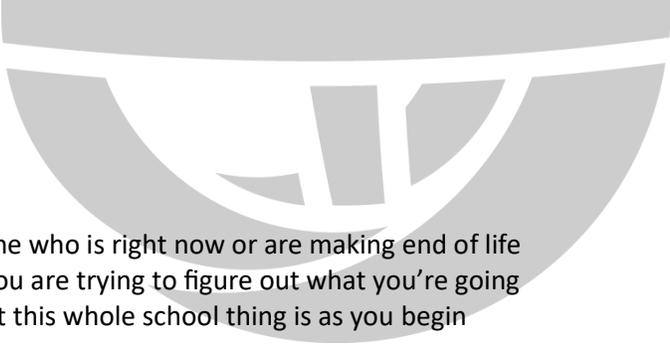
When a journey is lifelong, we have to keep it interesting (like we need to be reminded of that this year), we have to challenge ourselves in new ways, to love Jesus and love neighbors in new ways. We can't do it all at once, but yet we can be brave and take one step.

Friends, I realize right now as I speak-some of you are preparing for a new baby to join your family and some are grieving infertility, or recess or the loss of a high school or college football season,

Some of you are getting your kid launched for college, while others are moving into a care facility or dorm. Some of you are learning your ABC's today while yet others are learning the quadratic equation or memorizing a new diagnostic check list for some rare disorder and some of you are making some weighty decision that will effect real people's lives at work.

A few of you made breakfast for your grandkids this morning while others of you learned to use a fork and yet others skipped breakfast for 10 more minutes of sleep.





Some of you are actively dying or sitting by the beside of someone who is right now or are making end of life decisions for your parents as you listen to this- while others of you are trying to figure out what you're going to do when you grow up or how you're going to pay rent or what this whole school thing is as you begin kindergarten...it's a lifelong journey ...

And in each moment and in every season. Jesus is with you and the church, Jesus very resurrected body here- on earth promises to love you and be with you too. At every step you tale.

That is the beauty and call of the church that claims following Jesus is a lifelong journey as a core value. We're truly all in this together, we get to journey together-with Jesus-moving forward and occasionally being shoved forward in faith. May it be so with us Zumbro, may it be so. Amen.

