*Turn Back to God*

Luke 24:36-48

Yesterday’s beautiful day reminded me of the time I planted strawberries in the middle of the huge yard we had in Dundee. One of the women of the church gave me some of her strawberry plants to put in my new garden. They were half wilted runners she had dug up for me. So I planted and watered and kept the weeds away as best I could through the rest of summer. They seemed to grow, but at the signs of first frost in the fall, they wilted again and I had my doubts that my dream of fresh, new strawberries would survive until spring. Spring came, snow melted, temperatures warmed, new life began to emerge and as I began to rake the old leaves out of the strawberry bed, I did notice new leaves beginning to pop out on the runners. My first batch of new berries started growing, not many, but enough to enjoy. So, as the leaves began to wilt with the coming of the first frost in the fall, I anticipated what the next spring would bring. This time I had a little more hope for those strawberry plants.

Just after Jesus’ death, the disciples had little hope for their new faith. Their beloved teacher, friend and master had been crucified. They had maybe ho0ped Jesus would have been the one to redeem Israel, perhaps being the one who would lead the people back to God. Perhaps they had even felt they had been walking in God’s presence when they interacted with Jesus. He had shown them many wonders and taught them new ways of thinking about themselves and about God. But in the fall of leader, their hopes had been dashed. Now they faced a long winter of darkness. The leaves had wilted and doubts about the future surfaced. It was over! Had his life made any difference after all? Where were the promised berries of new life? But Jesus had been preparing the disciples for a new spring, a time when new leaves would surface and the promised fruit would emerge, and the fruit would reach far beyond their initial hopes and dreams.

We have such high expectations for the Christian life. We are often taught and believe that once we have accepted Jesus Christ and made him a part of our live, we will be made new people and we are. But the newness of life that we experience can quickly give way to the temptations in life that have always been with us. We give in to the little temptation and our faith is eroded just a little crack. The leaves have begun to wilt. We find subtle ways for more leaves to begin to wilt and faith be eroded. It is kind of like drinking or taking drugs. We take a sip and or pop a pill and find it eases some of the tension or pain of life and masks our discomfort. But the pain comes back so we take a little more. Before we are even aware of it, alcohol or drugs become our sedative of choice and it takes more and more of it to take care of the pain as our bodies adjust. Somewhere along the line we become out of control and drinking interferes with daily life. I am not saying that drinking or taking pain pills is wrong. I am saying that when we use them as sedatives to dull our pain and anxiety, they can begin to take over and control our lives for us.

Our conviction of faith stand the same opportunities for erosion. It is easy to give up our time of prayer because we have more “pressing” demands. It is easy to hang on to our resentments and hurts because we simply do not want to let people off the hook. It is easy to give up coming to church on Sunday, because we feel we need a little extra sleep. And it’s much easier to focus ono ur difficulties than trusting in God and praying our needs to the One who can truly make a difference. It’s easy to see the places where God seemingly has not responded to prayers, rather than entertain the possibility that prayer was answered in a different way than we wanted. When these things begin to erode our faith, it isn’t long before we have become addicted to life without God. Like the alcoholic we find other things to sedate us and move us through life hopelessly searching for meaning and answers outside our faith, outside of God. We had originally hope that God would be the answer. Instead we find that our expectations of God have not been fulfilled.

But God plants the seeds deep within us so they can “winter over” our lack of faith. The disciples who were without hope those few days without Jesus had those seeds planted deeply. And as light dawned with the appearance of Jesus the seeds were watered and the possibility of new growth emerged. That is often what happens when our faith begins to wane or fade. There are many paths in the wrong direction because God doesn’t promise to eliminate them. We still have to travel through life’s difficulties. We get so caught up in our travels, our problems, that we don’t remember that Jesus is there with us, continuing to protect those wintered seeds, feeding us, preparing us and finding the right times for those seeds to begin to spring again.

John Riley went on his first hunt alone in the river swamp near his home as an eleven year old boy. His father took him to the edge of the swamp and said, “The sun is over your shoulder as you walk into the woods. When you are ready to come out just walk toward the sun and you’ll come to the road.” Off he went into the great adventure of hunting alone. He did not notice that it became cloudy as the day passed. It was time to go home./ He looked up and saw only an overcast sky. He took his best guess and began to walk out of the swamp. After about an hour he saw a footprint near a creek he recognized as his own. He panicked and sat down on a log and began to cry. A hand reached out and grasped his shoulder. It was his father. “You didn’t think I would leave you alone the first time you went hunting alone. Get up and let’s go get some supper.”

How many times have we lost our way? And how many times has God drawn us back? The disciples had lost their way. The man they had believed in was gone. Their hopes of a redeemed Israel were lost. But Jesus was with them. When they witnessed his presence they gained new insight and understanding about who he really was. Sure, they would have difficult times ahead, but they also knew Jesus would be with them in a different, even better way. Faith had been restored, even improved very much. They were fitted for a new faith and knew what that meant and its power would make a difference in their lives and in the lives of people around the world.

Eater is about learning a new thing. It’s about trusting that strawberries will blossom and fruit will happen. It’s about walking through hopeless situations knowing that Jesus is there walking with us even when we don’t see him. Easter is about reflecting on possibility, being renewed when faith has faded and we’ve wandered away. This is the time to look at our situation, hear the gospel message and let God weave them together so we begin to have the seeds of faith stirred up within u, because God is wanting us to be available to receive peace and joy and renewed life. We have things we want, mostly hope, and God has certain things he wants to provide.

When what one asks of God and what God does for one coincide, that’s where one stand upon holy ground. When David Livingstone, great explorer, said he would go to Africa, as God was looking for someone to go, a covenant was created. When Mary said yes to being the handmaid of the Lord, just as G9od was looking for the best way to become one with his people, a prophecy was fulfilled.. When a person is tired of running from God, turns and runs into his arms, love is experienced and fears are vanquished. Thomas asked Jesus to do what Jesus was already willing to do: reestablish the certainty of his faith. Doe God do this to make us powerful? No, he does it to make us available again.

The disciples became available again, even stronger than before and with new understanding. Are we too going through hard times? Jesus is walking with us and when the seeds he has planted within us begin to stir, we will emerge from those trials and difficulties stronger than we were before and with new understanding and we will be available to God once again. Jesus appearing to his disciples is above all else a story of hope and it is our story whenever we find ourselves weak, alone, troubled or desperate. Lord, open our eyes and let us know you are already there. Help us to turn again to you in the faith you have planted within us.