

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, February 8, 2026

Before we do, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, and let's take just a couple deep breaths together.

Let's take a deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies. Breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies, and breathe out God's mercies to others.

And let us pray.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power, you would quiet any voice within us but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day, and in hearing, we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the 13th verse of the 24th chapter, the Gospel according to Luke.

Now on that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus about 7 miles from Jerusalem and talking with each other about all the things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Jesus said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" And they replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. And how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes. And besides all of this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Some of the women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning. And when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." Then Jesus said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared. Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" And then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So Jesus went in to stay with them. And when he was at table with them, he

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took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. and their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem and found the 11 and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon." And then they told what had happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

One of my favorite seminary professors, Walter Brueggemann, called scripture, called the Bible "a field of imagination in which we are constantly watching people rise up to newness." "A field of imagination in which we are constantly watching people rise up to newness." Brueggemann claims that actually this rising to newness starts in Genesis at the very beginning of our story when God tells Abraham and Sarah that nations will grow from them and yet they are unable to have children. Scripture says that they were old, but not just old, scripture says that they were "as good as dead."

(Pause for laughter. I didn't have that written in here actually.)

Then God shows up. Then God shows up, and then there's a baby, and then life begins anew. In fact, nations do indeed grow from them. The Bible is littered with this idea, this belief of new life rising up. There's Lazarus, one who was imagined to be dead. In fact, was dead. Jesus shows up and all of a sudden there is new life. And it's not always when somebody dies, but there's some stories for us where newness rises from something that feels beyond the grasp and power of our God. There's the paralytic man who's carried by his friends to the place where Jesus is gathered, to a home. They can't make their way into the place so that Jesus can lay his hand upon their friend. And so instead, they get up on the roof, and they open the thatch roof, and they lower their friend down to the feet of Jesus. And all of a sudden, at the feet of Jesus, new life rises up. And here in this story, the followers who had walked with Jesus on the way are now walking away. And, yet, they get to see Jesus as he has been raised to newness, to new life. When we, the people of God, say that we believe Christ to be the Risen One, we are claiming that we worship the God who has ultimate power and final authority over death and darkness. Death does not hold ultimate authority in this world or any world. God does. That's the claim that we make when we say that Christ is the risen one. Right when we have made the determination, just as these followers of Jesus had. Right when we've made the determination that it is finished, we show up

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at the tomb, and it is empty. The heavy thing, the stone too large for any person to roll away has been pushed to the side. The thing that we have wrapped up so tightly, so carefully, so painstakingly because we believe it to be dead, that thing is no longer there. It has been raised to newness of life. When we say that we believe Christ to be the Risen One, we say that our God is an Easter God. And that means that God's future is always, always about being raised to newness of life.

And that's really important good news for us to hold. There are many dimensions of this Christology that we have been building that most theologians would tell you are critical to make sure we're checking the Reformed understanding of who Christ is. I'd posit to you that Christ the Risen One is one of the most differentiating of all the things that we will discuss, that we have discussed. That trusting and believing that death could not overpower our God, that our God is in fact the final authority, and that the final word of our God is always one of life—that is critically important for us to hold together. It gives shape to the rest of our Christology. Without this part, Christology would...having a really clear and good Christology wouldn't have as much weight in the world.

And yet, more often than not, while we can claim that we believe Christ to be the Risen one, more often than not, more often than we'd like to admit, we do not live into our understanding, our belief. Because more often than not, we find it very difficult to see with our own eyes the truth of the power of resurrection at work in the world. We find it hard to believe that we worship a God of newness when we walk roads that feel lonely and filled with despair and hurt and anger and frustration and disappointment. When we walk those roads, we more often than not feel like those early followers did on that road to Emmaus. We feel abandoned by our God in that place. So when we look out into the world and we see the difficulties that face us in these days, it is hard for us to lay our eyes upon our God.

This story is important for us because it tells us that while we might be looking for really significant flags along our journey, events that bowl us over, the Risen One simply comes alongside us, in gentleness and in companionship. The Risen One starts to ask us questions about what we have been experiencing. What things this Jesus of Nazareth, what things are you talking about? When we're walking along the journey that feels that we have been abandoned, the risen Christ comes alongside us and says, "Tell me about what you've been experiencing." Yeah. Sighs and cries too deep for words. Yeah. That's what this story tells us, that there's this gentleness in the Resurrected One, this inquisitiveness, this one that greets us with questions and then begins to reveal the ways in which Christ has been working. In the midst of our disappointment, our grief, and our despair, Christ meets us on our journey just like he met those on the journey to

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Emmaus. Diana Butler Bass is famous to have said, "Resurrection happens. It happens all around us. We just have to look for it. We have to have eyes to see it." What we see in this story is that more often than not, those who follow in the way of Jesus actually don't have eyes to see the Resurrection, the rising to new life that is around them.

I told you I was up in Gaithersburg yesterday. It was a wonderful couple of days. I got to go up there. I thought we had gotten it bad with the snow and ice. It was like 2 degrees negative 8 when I woke up yesterday morning outside of DC, and the snow was piled up, you know, 5 ft high. The joy of being there was to spend time with Joshua and get to...get to just experience the friendship that we have and then get to see a community that's wrapping themselves around him in beautiful and loving ways.

Yesterday at around 11:00 Eastern time, we gathered in the sanctuary of Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church. It's a sanctuary very different from this sanctuary. It's a sanctuary that happens in the round. Have you ever worshiped in a place that worships in the round before? Yeah, some of you have. Yeah. It's a beautiful thing because what you do is you don't look at a preacher or a liturgist. You look at each other, the body of Christ. That's who you train your eye to across the way. I was seated there yesterday in a pretty prominent seat, actually, to the left hand of Joshua Narcisse. Right. It was wonderful for me because it took me back to a different place. For the better part of three years, Joshua sat there and I sat here, and that's kind of how we sat yesterday, right? But now in a sanctuary where he will pastor and preach and lead the people of God. The service was about 2 hours and 10 minutes, which gave me plenty of time to reflect on the journey that I have been on. I was a preacher. I only took about 15 minutes, I got to tell you. But it was...it was a...it was a beautiful time that gave me the opportunity to really reflect on the journey. So I'm sitting there beside Joshua, and what starts coming back to my mind is the journey that we have had, that he has had, that I have had over the last several years, right. Just last week I celebrated five years of ministry here, and so I've kind of been in a reflective mood, right, but this gave me some devoted time to be able to think about the journey that I've been on, what my road to Emmaus has looked like. Right? It gave me an opportunity to think about the times that I've been walking over the last couple years in what I would call disappointment, right? Or even sometimes despair. Y'all maybe know what that feels like, right? To walk as the folks did on that path a couple thousand years ago, to be walking away, to have your back to something that feels dead and gone, right? To have your back to something that has disappointed you, brought despair into your life, discouraged you on your journey. I got to think about all the different ways in which I've walked down that path over my life. The nice thing about it being a little bit longer service is it also gave me the opportunity not simply to think about the paths that I've walked down, but to think about the gentle ways that Christ has met me on that journey, on

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that road that's felt dusty and overwhelming. Just come alongside. That's...that's actually how I've experienced Christ over the last few years. Much less lightning bolt, much more gentle presence, much more a question asker, right? Much more one who calls me to deeper reflection on scripture like Christ did on that road a couple thousand years ago.

And yet in that gentleness and in that presence, what became evident over and over, praise the Lord, is that we do worship a risen God. One who brings resurrecting power into the world over and over and over again. As I was sitting there yesterday, seated at the left hand of Joshua, I looked across and there were some Idlewilders and some Memphians just right across the communion table from me. I thought about the journey that they had been on. I knew a bit about their journeys as well. What the last few years have meant for them too. The gentle presence of the Risen One is a really powerful thing.

Here's what I don't know. I'm not sure what the dusty path looks like for you this morning. I'm not sure what you have your back to and you are walking away from. I do know that pain and despair and being discouraged, those are real human things. I do know that I've seen disappointment in marriages and in work lives and in friendships. I've seen despair when it comes to watching parents age. I've seen what it looks like to think that something has passed away and is dead and gone. And so I wonder if this morning the invitation is for you to have some new eyes. And we're not going to break bread together, but we got a table here. And I wonder if in the gentle presence of our God walking alongside you, you might trust and believe that whatever it is that you are walking away from, that there is still the promise of newness that can rise up.

And maybe you're not walking a dusty road today, but you live in a world that has a lot of dusty roads, right? You live in a world that knows pain and fear and anxiety and disappointment. That would by all measures not say that there's Resurrection coming. And if that's the case, then maybe you could imagine the Risen One coming gently alongside us to nurture us in community as well.

And this is the first day that I've been in Memphis that the sidewalks are clear. Some of y'all are getting back to school. Is it tomorrow? We're not counting the days. Yeah. Oh, yes, we are. Amen. Okay. Here's an invitation for you in this season of Epiphany as we are wrestling with building a Christology together. I wonder if a walk might do you well this afternoon. Right. I wonder if maybe you want to call a friend and see if they have a couple minutes or an hour or so this afternoon to go walking with you. I wonder if you might take that walk, that journey with them and it might invite you to think about the places that feel full of despair for you, that feel

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like they don't have the possibility of new life. Maybe you want to walk by yourself. I don't know. That's your decision to make. Here's what I want to tell you and what I want to invite you to. If you take a walk this afternoon, at some point on the journey, I want you to imagine that the Risen One is drawing up real close to your side. Right? The Risen One is very interested in the journey that you've been walking, the things that have been difficult and disappointing and hurtful to you. Right? He is there present with you. One of the claims that we make that is pivotal to our faith is that we believe Christ to be the Risen One. So here's my hope for you today. If you decide to take a walk, either literally or figuratively, that you can know and trust and believe that the work of resurrection is still ongoing. That this...that this God who is bent on newness of life, who revealed it in Genesis and and later in Lazarus and and then finally in Jesus the Christ, that that is the same God of your life and of this world. Okay? I'm not sure there's anything that we need to understand more fundamentally than that we worship a God who has been raised and the Risen One walks alongside us.

So I want to pray for the walk that you take, maybe today or maybe in the days to come. I want to pray that you might be greeted by our Savior in a gentle and loving and kind way.

Let's pray together.

Gracious one, we make a lot of claims about you. We say you are the word made flesh. We say that Christ is indeed the image of God. We say that you are our teacher and our healer. We say that you are the crucified one. And this morning we stake our claim fully that you are the Risen One as well. You are the one that brings newness of life from every dead and dark place. You are the one that overwhelms despair with hopefulness. You are the one that comes alongside us on our dusty roads that feel a whole lot like disappointment and despair. And you reveal yourself to us in wisdom and in truth. And so what I pray for, Lord, is that as we walk those dusty roads, whether this afternoon or in the days ahead, you might come alongside us gently.

That you might not vanish from us quickly as you did those followers so long ago, but that you might abide with us, that your presence might reassure us that death does not have the final word, that light will always overcome darkness, and that your hope, the hope that was held by those followers so long ago, is a hope that is still real and true and abiding and transformative in its power in this day. So greet us on our road, O Risen One, and lead us forward with grace and with hope. For we ask it in your name. Amen.