

## ***“Help Is On the Way”***

I cannot describe how good it is to be with you today. Even though today, five from our church family are worshipping directly in the presence of God (Glenn and Lorie Holland, Judy Smith, Nancy Douthitt) and we grieve their loss. Even though some from among us are recovering in hospitals and in critical condition. Even though some from among us are still missing. Even though many among us are numb with the loss of home and belongings and church. It's good to gather together today and to see each other's faces. We're all filled with this strange mix of grief and shock, thankfulness and joy, weariness and resilience.

As a church, our Worship Center may be destroyed, but our spirit is not, our fellowship is not destroyed, our mission, to love God, to love others, to serve the world, is not destroyed—not even dented! And now more than ever we need each other. 51 of our families lost their homes entirely. Now more than ever our community needs us.

I once read that when a bone breaks and heals, that it actually becomes stronger in the broken places. We will be strongest in the broken places. We will be stronger than ever before.

I want to thank Dan Mitchell and The Bridge. They are allowing us to meet here on Sundays as long as we need to. They've opened up office space for our staff. We don't have phones here yet but are working on that. In the meantime contact us through Facebook, email, or our website or cell phones.

The Bridge is a distribution center. So we're going to partner with them by being their delivery corps. Every Sunday when you come to church, bring a list of people you know and the things they need and pick them up here and deliver them there. Clothes, water, food, hygiene items, baby items. And if you have needs yourself, please let Sunday be a day where you not only refill your soul, but you take what need to care for your body.

For as long as we need to, we want these times when we gather for worship to also be times to meet practical needs. We will do our best to have contact information for services you will need. There is a table over there with a ton of information about agencies that can help.

And we want these gatherings on Sunday, especially today, to be a time to tell our stories, to have a cup of coffee, to laugh, to cry, and look into each other's eyes, and remind each other that none of us walk this path alone.

We also want Sundays to be a time to gather information about your status if you need help of some sort. Or if you have things you can offer to help someone else—household items, spare rooms, apartments, cars, whatever. You've probably already noticed the form in your program today. Please take the time to tell us what's happening in your life so we can better help one another. The Bible tells us to carry each other's burdens and when we do we fulfill the law of Christ, the law of love.

Lots of you are asking about the future of our church. The Worship Center was destroyed. About 25% of the Family Life Center roof was torn off. There was minor damage to the roof in the youth area, and minimal damage to the children's wing. We've already begun the process of rebuilding because our community needs us. Crews have been working at the church to clear debris and prepare for reconstruction. We'll have our FLC ready in a short time, and when it is, we'll go home and have a home-going party! Our leaders are working hard to see that happen. Not because our buildings define us, but because us returning home, will help the neighborhood come home, us returning home will help people have hope and start life anew.

Listen very carefully to these words of Jesus: **“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).** Jesus said, **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** Even when it doesn't seem like it, that is the truth.

Sunday, in my mind, is a blur. I remember running a lot. I've been trying to reconstruct it in my mind. On Sunday after the storm I got in my truck and drove toward the church. I got as far as 32<sup>nd</sup> and Schifferdecker and the house of one of my friends in my small group, Joe Crosthwait. I was so relieved to see him and his family standing in his front yard. His house was destroyed but he and his family were fine, they told me about the Hickcox that lived next to them. I ran to their house and searched it. They had gotten out. Then I ran up Winfield Street. I met family after family just wandering-- the Capras, the Dennings, the Orlandos—one family after another. All I knew to ask was, “Is everybody accounted for in your house, your neighbor's house?” When I got to the church I found one person, Becky Burress, had weathered the storm in the kitchen. She was fine. She loved that kitchen before, she loves it even more now.

I saw the neighborhoods to the north were relatively ok and ran to the south. I went back to 26<sup>th</sup> St. and a young couple was running east. I just ran with them and started searching for one of their mothers—Betty McCoy. She had gotten out.

Another couple ran by heading down Oliver St. They were looking for friends of theirs. We found their house, but they didn't make it. Glenn and Lorie Holland were killed in their home. I stood with their friends, we huddled right there and prayed for their family. Across the street two elderly people lay dead in their back yard—I never found out their names.

Running, digging, miracles of life, tragedies of death. I started digging with another young couple looking for friends. It took me a while to realize that I was digging in the rubble of the house of our youth director, Brandon Hawkins, and his wife Dani. They were so relieved when I told them that I had seen them and that they were ok.

I think it was about that time that I got a call that I needed to get to the church. That it was being set up as a triage center. I ran back to the church. Some of the doctors and nurses from St. Johns were there treating people. Loading them on ambulances. There were people wandering in from everywhere. Many bleeding, coming **for** help. Many others coming **to** help. Church members and neighbors bringing water, food, helping the sick, hooking up generators, praying with people, comforting people, making calls for people, taking people to the homes of family or friends, or to Memorial Hall. Utterly amazing. Truly inspiring. I'm so proud of you as a church.

And then in the days afterward, many of you going house to house, helping people pick through their belongings and salvage what they can. Clearing downed trees. Offering cars, homes, apartments, spare rooms, clothes. All of that is a demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Listen, all this week we've been running on adrenaline. I have a hunch it's beginning to wear off and we need to process this deep trauma. A trauma is an event where you believe that you, or somebody you love, is threatened with annihilation. And that leads you to feel hopeless and can overwhelm your ability to cope (Dr. Serene Jones of Yale University).

All of us have seen things that will change us forever. We're saying things like, "It's unimaginable. I'm numb with the devastation. Will we ever feel safe? I feel so helpless. I feel guilty that my home and family was untouched. It's so mindboggling..."

Keep those phrases in mind as we look at a passage of scripture that I think might prepare us for the future. The setting for this is right after Jesus is betrayed, beaten, humiliated, crucified and buried. It's Sunday and some of the disciples don't yet know that Jesus has been resurrected. Two of them were on their way out of Jerusalem where Jesus had been killed. They're leaving town, heading home to a nearby village called Emmaus. It says that while they were walking, they were **"talking about all these things that had happened."** Can't you just picture them saying the things we've been saying, "It's unimaginable. I'm numb with the devastation. Will we ever feel safe? I feel so helpless. I feel guilty that my home and family was untouched. It's so mindboggling..."

They had been through a trauma. Their teacher, their friend, had been treated like a hero on Sunday, but by Friday he was tried, convicted and executed. Their whole world had come crashing down, a darkness had covered the land.

One expert said that after a trauma people can fall into certain patterns. One is a desire to become violent towards others—I think I've seen a little bit of that in the threats and rage I've heard against looters—I feel that rage. We have a tendency to react to trauma with violence. And after a trauma there's often a desire to withdraw and avoid talking about the situation. And after a trauma you're likely to live in a state of hyper-arousal expecting another disaster to come. On Monday night when the sirens went off again, what did you do? My heart raced, and again on Friday when more storms blew in I couldn't help but scan the clouds.

In order for us to cope long-term we have to reorder our disordered lives. We have to gain a new perspective. That is what happened to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Listen to this passage of scripture. **"Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named**

**Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?' 'What things?' he asked" (Luke 24:13-19).**

This is important. After their trauma, the disciples didn't have to walk alone. And neither do we. They needed somebody to be with them as they grieved. And Jesus came to them. They didn't have to ask for him, in fact they couldn't ask for him because they had no hope the he could help them. But Jesus had promised to be with them. Before his arrest he had told them, **"I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you" (John 14:18).** Jesus came to the disciples and he is coming to you and your families. You're not alone as you face the challenges of the days and weeks ahead. None of us know what the future holds, but we're not alone. Jesus is coming to all of us.

And do you know what Jesus did next? He let them talk. The disciples found it hard to believe that this guy walking with them didn't know what they were talking about. Jesus knew. But he listened as they told the story of how their hopes were destroyed. **"'What things?' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see'" (Luke 24:19-24).**

Jesus let them talk. We all need to talk. Will you talk to Jesus? He wants to hear your feelings, your concerns for your families, your questions about the future, your fears, your doubts. Pour it out to him, pour it out, and keep pouring it out. He's ready to listen.

But it doesn't end there. Jesus listened to the disciples share their concerns, their worries, their pain at their loss, but this is where he begins to reshape their reality. Listen carefully. **"He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27).**

Catch this, Jesus listened to the disciples, he knew they were disoriented, but he didn't allow them to get stuck in their grief, in their fear, in their loss. He used the scriptures to help them see their trauma differently. He reminded them about God's promises. He led them through the scriptures about himself to help them reorder their thoughts. That was the only way they would ever move forward.

He helped them to see that his death was part of God's plan for their salvation and ours. As he walked with them he was living proof that God can take something as terrifying as a crucifixion and bring new life from it. God can take something as terrifying as a tornado and the death and destruction that followed and bring new life from it. Jesus had said, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).** He said, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1).** Maybe he quoted Jeremiah 29, where God says, after Jerusalem is sacked and the Temple destroyed. God says, **"I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me..." (Jeremiah 29:11-13, MSG).** Maybe Jesus quoted the 23 Psalm where the writer says, **"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me."**

Jesus reoriented them by speaking to them the truths they had forgotten. Listen, God wants to speak to you, through the scriptures, through the songs in worship, through your time in Bible study and conversation with others, so that you know that you are not alone.

In the face of this trauma and tragedy you may have forgotten that Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of time." You may have forgotten that his name means, "God saves." You may have forgotten that one of his nick names is Emmanuel which means, God is with us. Those disciples experienced God with them and so will we.

Mike and Bernice Robinson found shelter in their bathtub. Their house was demolished, they were safe. Mike said that every piece of glass in their house was broken, except the glass doors of the bathtub they were in and the large mirrors in the bathroom—if they'd broken it would have cut them to shreds. God is with you.

Nick and Louann Capra sought shelter in their closet. The rest of their house was utterly destroyed, but that closet stood firm. Nick said it was a miracle. God is with you.

The Warden's house was being torn apart around them and they were being lifted up into the air. Their son Ty started praying out loud, "Lord, you can't be done with us yet. Save us!" And they were gently set back down. God is with you.

The Cheathams had to rescue a family of 6 in their neighborhood. One of the little boys said that the wind pick up and threw him into the sky, but an angel with wings held him and set him down. God is with you.

Even for those who lives were lost, God was with them. Mark Norton was with his son Will who had just graduated. They were on their way back home when their vehicle got hit. Mark said as the car was flipped over and over Will just poured out prayer, praise and scripture, and then he was gone. Mark said it was like God was right there in the car bringing comfort to the family. God is with you.

The residents of The Greenbrier Nursing Home that were killed; the people at Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Pizza Hut, Stained Glass Theater. God was with them. Jesus said, **"In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3-4).** God is with you. In life; in death.

Jesus never promised that there would be no storms if we followed him. He never promised that we would always be protected. He never promised that we wouldn't lose everything in a catastrophe. He never promised that our loved ones wouldn't suffer and die. But over and over and over and over again he said, "I will be with you, through every storm, through every loss, through every mind numbing insurance form. I will be with you. In this life and the next." Jesus reframed, reordered the disciples grief reminding them what they had forgotten.

But the story doesn't end there. **"As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (Luke 24:28-36).**

It wasn't Jesus' presence or his words that opened their eyes, it was joining him at the table and breaking bread. It was communion. The sign of Christian community. The act that remind us that we not only need Jesus, we need each other. In a time of crisis it's tempting to withdraw. Everybody needs to grieve in their own way. We all need some time alone. But you also need support and care. Jesus said, "...when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there" (Matthew 18:20). So care for one another. In this time make worshipping and gathering in small groups a priority like never before. Not only for you, but for the people who will simply need your presence.

Late Friday night I delivered the news to Mark, Trish and Sarah Norton that Will's body had been identified. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. As I spent that time with them, as heart-breaking as that time was, I tried, I tried my hardest, to be the living presence of Jesus to them. To offer them the comfort of Christ.

I walked out of elevator about midnight empty. As I walked out of the elevator there was one man in the lobby. Danny Lowe, a church member. He asked how I was doing and I just broke down. And he just held me. And he was Jesus to me. We had communion there in that moment.

You are the most amazing church. Be Jesus for the people of Joplin. Be Jesus to one another. Be Jesus to the numb, to the grieving. Bring his hope, his love, his strength, his power to shape the future into this time. God is with us. And even today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Sandra Nenadal for her words of comfort to the clergy of the SW District. Her teaching which she drew from Dr. Serene Jones, is the heart of this message.*