

Recognizing and Acting Upon the Burning in our Hearts

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Among the Gospel passages that describe appearances of the Risen Jesus, Saint Luke's account of the Emmaus journey offers us a wonderful and detailed narrative. Downcast, they return home because it is over, all they had hoped for in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is over, he's dead and he's buried. This journey of the two disciples, walking in despair can be quite reflective of times in our lives.

Though they do not recognize him, the Risen Jesus meets them on the road -he meets them where they are! And in the midst of their despair Jesus asks them a simple question, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" This not only helps them to give words to their despair but opens their minds and hearts to find a deeper meaning within their despair. They share of their experience of Jesus of Nazareth, "Who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did in the sight of God and of the whole people and how our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death and had him crucified. Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. And that is not all, some women in our group went to the tomb where they saw a vision of angels who declared he was alive!"

In reply, the Risen Jesus opens the Scriptures for them to understand how he is the fulfillment of all that was said by Moses and the prophets. After recognizing the Risen Jesus through the opening of the Scriptures and in the breaking of the Bread (a liturgical act) the two disciples shared, "Were not our hearts burning within us . . ." And in this burning in their hearts, they took action, they returned to Jerusalem to share with the others their experience of hope in their encounter with the Risen Jesus – it is not over, all is not lost! He is alive, there is hope!

In our Death Penalty Abolition and Restorative Justice Team meetings the question asked by the Risen Jesus, "What are you discussing?" helps us to focus our attention and energies in our work in the face of State-Sanctioned killing - capital punishment. There are some signs of hope:

- The State of Virginia (a Southern State) officially abolished capital punishment on July 1, 2021, making Virginia the 23rd State to do so. As a nation we are approaching the half-way mark of States that have abolished State-sanctioned killing as a form of punishment. Several other States have a moratorium on executions.

- On March 10, 2026, the Governor of Alabama, Kay Ivey, commuted the death sentence of Charles Lee Burton to life in prison, recognizing the evidence that was not presented at his trial, he was not the person who shot and killed the store attendant in 1992. This is a sign of hope as Alabama has been one of the most active States to carry out executions.
- In States that continue to have State-sanctioned killing of prisoners (among these are Alabama, Florida, Idaho, and Texas) there are local, on-the-ground efforts to publicize and protest each and every execution. More notably, in Idaho people of conscious are protesting plans for the building of a facility where state-sanctioned killing will be carried out by a firing squad. One message in this protest reads, "Would you build the cross on which Jesus was killed?"

During these 50 days of Easter may we also find hope through our own encounters with the Risen Jesus; as our hearts burn within us in the face of injustice may we take action – this may include writing our elected officials about an injustice before us, this may include getting others involved, stirring the embers that burn within all our hearts in the face of injustice.

In this Easter season may we also take to heart the words of Jesus found in two other Gospel passages, "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you" (John 15:9), and "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).