

I. Advanced organizer

- A. There's a very old story that comes to us from Ancient Greek Mythology. You might start it by speaking of **King Minos, a ruler who lived on the island of Crete**. Through a series of events in which Minos had been in conflict with the gods, his wife ended up mating with an animal and giving birth to a monster. Her child had the body of a human but the head of a bull. As he grew, it became clear, he was only satisfied to be fed with human flesh. They called him a **Minotaur**.
1. In order to contain the Minotaur that Minos' wife had born, **King Minos hired the most talented architect in all of Greece**. He commissioned him to build a facility near the castle in which the Minotaur could live. It was to be an **impossibly complex structure** with winding pathways that would be immensely difficult to navigate. **The Minotaur was to live in the midst of a maze**.
 2. The monster was fed in the maze by a set of seven young men and woman from Crete's enemy, Athens, who were **regularly offered to him**. None who were thrown into the maze could escape because it was so challenging to navigate. Overtime, inevitably, each teenage tribute would eventually be destroyed when the monster found them within it's many walls.
 3. That is until the **young prince Theseus of Athens volunteered** to be one of the tributes sent to Crete, with hopes that he might battle and defeat the monster. Lucky for Theseus, his arrival in Crete **caught the attention of Minos' daughter, the Princess Ariadne**, who immediately fell in love with him and was determined to help him survive the maze. She persuaded her father's architect to reveal the maze's secret, and then, sharing the news with Theseus of how to traverse the maze, she gave him **a scarlet cord** he could unwind throughout his journey, so that once he had reached the monster and slain it, he could once again find his way out and back to her. Ariadne's plan was successfully, and the young hero **Theseus became known in Greek mythology as the one who escaped the maze and slayed the Minotaur in its center**.
- B. Well, I start my teaching this morning with this very old story because I think, as fantastical as it may be, if we're honest, the tale of Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur **might actually hold some resonance**. Sure, none of us face a distorted creature seeking to devour us in the midst of an ancient engineered puzzle. But we might know what it feels like to **feel lost in the midst of a lot of complicated possibilities**. As we try to navigate them, we might feel like we're doomed to travel in circles or regularly hit dead ends, continuously moving through time but not clearly reaching a destination. We might wonder if all along, **a dark force lurks around the corner** ready to devour us.
- C. For this reason, today I'm kicking off a new teaching series that will take us into the summer. I'm calling it ***"Navigating the Maze: Finding God in the Midst of Complexity."***
1. Y'all, **we're living through some complicated times**, and the complexity of the realities around us makes it challenging to navigate our life journeys individually and collectively. I started this year calling us as a Haven community into a potential invitation of Jesus for all of us in 2024, **to grow in Jesus' call to be peacemakers**. ("Blessed are the peacemakers", Jesus had said.) But ask any one involved in **international diplomacy** and they will acknowledge, **peacemaking is complex work**. We need to deal with multiple perspectives or sets of needs that often can feel in conflict. Reducing complicated issues to clear black and white truth statements might feel personally helpful and more comfortable for our minds, but it usually doesn't help make peace. **That kind of reductionist thinking often only increases division**.

2. So whether we're talking about addressing generations of collective trauma, fear and violence that exist for those living in **Israel and Palestine**, or we're considering how we **preserve democracy at home** in the midst of an increasingly fragmented society, or we're struggling to call people around the world to **band together to preserve the planet from an unfolding climate crisis**, these big problems demand we resist settling for easy answers. They demand we engage with realities that are bigger than we can often wrap our heads around. **They may feel like being thrust into an impossible maze.**
 3. So **what navigational tools might faith offer us in the midst of complexity?** How might journeying together with one another and a connection to the Divine draw our attention to some signposts along the way? That's some of what I hope to explore in the coming months, engaging some different complex realities I've been thinking about lately, and inviting you into a journey of considering them together. Later in the series, we'll consider together how we as Jesus-followers, we might approach complicated issues like war in the quest for peace, like how we understand God's relationship to suffering, and more. We'll also hear from other voices throughout this set of conversations, like guest speaker Cara Meredith next week and our own Luca Reve in May.
 4. I'll say from the outset, at least for my part, **I am not here to be your expert on the maze.** I am not Minos' architect. I don't have all the answers for how we get to the right destination. For myself, **I may even question the idea of only one correct path through.** What matters to me, and what I hope to invite you into in the coming weeks, is an opportunity to **journey together well.** So think of me not as an expert but as a traveling companion, drawing **our attention to some of the guideposts I notice along the way**, and inviting each of us to find our own way of navigating a path in connection with the Divine through complexity.
- D. So **what does any of this have to do with Easter?** Perhaps you might feel like this conversation about winding paths and complicated realities doesn't feel very fitting for an Easter reflection. Easter is the time we think about a very clear, confident claim of Christian faith: that Jesus, after being crucified by the Romans came back to life. "He is risen!" We proclaim. "He is risen, indeed!"
1. That proclamation is incredibly hopeful, affirming that in some way that **Jesus, after being destroyed by the vicious monster of mob violence, seemed to have transcended the maze itself.** At the same time, as our sacred stories recorded in our Bible show us, the people he was connecting with that first Easter Sunday were still **very much in the middle of their maze.** They were lost, sifting through complex realities, and the Divine, present in the form of a risen Jesus met them in strange, complicated ways to help them find a way forward. So that's how we're gonna start this series with the rest of our time today - looking at one of those Easter stories of Jesus meeting folks lost in the maze and helping them begin to find their way.
- II. Our text today comes from the account of **Luke, in chapter 24.** We pick up the story after a group of women has visited Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning, and found a pair of angels there but no lifeless body for them to attend to. The woman had run to Jesus' apostles to tell them their story, but no one had believed them. We pick up the story with verse 13.
- A. Now that very day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking to each other about all the things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and debating these things, Jesus**

himself approached and began to accompany them 16 (but their eyes were kept from recognizing him).

- B.** *17 Then he said to them, “What are these matters you are discussing so intently as you walk along?” And they stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there in these days?” 19 He said to them, “What things?” “The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene,” they replied, “a man who, with his powerful deeds and words, proved to be a prophet before God and all the people; 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Not only this, but it is now the third day since these things happened. 22 Furthermore, some women of our group amazed us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body, they came back and said they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then 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.”*
- C.** *25 So he said to them, “You foolish people—how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures.*
- D.** *28 So they approached the village where they were going. He acted as though he wanted to go farther, 29 but they urged him, “Stay with us, because it is getting toward evening and the day is almost done.” So he went in to stay with them.*
- E.** *30 When he had taken his place at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 At this point their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Then he vanished out of their sight. 32 They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us while he was speaking with us on the road, while he was explaining the scriptures to us?” 33 So they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem. They found the eleven and those with them gathered together 34 and saying, “The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon!” 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how they recognized him when he broke the bread.*
- F.** So here we have a story of these two followers of Jesus discovered departing the city of Jerusalem on Easter Sunday. One is named for us, **Cleopas**, the other is not. Perhaps it was another man, a friend of Cleopas. Perhaps it was his wife. We’re not sure. These two folks don’t appear anywhere else explicitly in the Bible, this is the only moment they are the focus of the narrative.
1. We find these two are **heading from the capital Jerusalem, to an ancient village called Emmaus**. Many of the disciples have remained in Jerusalem, huddled up together, but these two head out of town. The story doesn’t tell us why - maybe they’re returning home after the Passover celebration as they always intended to do. Maybe they’re afraid to be too close to the scene of all the drama, lest the Romans who came for Jesus come to round up his followers too. Whatever their reason, these folks are heading to Emmaus and as they go, they’re processing all of the dramatic events they’ve just been through, which it sounds like everyone in the region must be talking about. Because when a mysterious stranger seems to appear among them they’re shocked he seems not to know what they’re discussing.

2. This strange encounter by these folks on the road with the presence of the Divine, come in the form of the risen Jesus, has some things I think to tell us about traveling through complexity, about navigating moments that feel like a maze. **These folks have been through it.** They are utterly disoriented. Their whole map for how they thought everything was supposed to go has now been torn apart, when they watched their leader be arrested, tried and nailed to a cross. Now they are bewildered and trying to make sense of the mixed-up reality they find themselves in. As they engage with Jesus, **here are a few things I notice** about God's presence with them in the midst of the maze that might be helpful for us to consider.

III. (Takeaways)

A. The first is that **God's presence in the maze can be difficult to perceive.**

1. What's cool is that these guys don't have to go looking for Jesus; **Jesus comes straight to them.** The presence of God is essentially there with them from the start of the story.
2. But of course...they don't perceive Jesus - something about their circumstance makes them unable to register who he is.
3. Now many through the ages have speculated this is some sort of **supernatural phenomena** - either God is somehow messing with their perception or Jesus' appearance is altered - and sure, that's one way to interpret the story - goodness knows the Easter narratives are filled with other supernatural elements like...rising from the dead and appearing and disappearing from places, so this might be more of that. But there are other angles we could consider, too.
4. They might miss recognizing Jesus because of a **trauma response.** This year I've been doing some professional development, studying in a certificate program on trauma and spiritual care, and in this program we've learned a lot about how psychological trauma impacts our bodies and our brains. **Trauma often catches us in a kind of mental loop.** We found ourselves in a situation that left us powerless and perhaps even threatened to destroy us. Our minds struggle to integrate that kind of experience into the greater life narrative we have - and so sometimes **we end up in a loop, replaying the trauma again and again.** We may replay it in what we talk about, in what we dream about, or even without being aware of it, we may enact it as our brain tries to make sense of something so deeply distressing and out of order. Perhaps these friends on the way to Emmaus were there - they had just lived through something horrifically traumatic and now they were in the mental loop as they talked back and forth about what had just happened. Perhaps they were so stuck in replaying the intense experience over and over, **they simply couldn't process the new information of who was walking in their midst.**
5. Another explanation for their inability to see Jesus could be **confirmation bias.** What does that mean? Psychologist Adam Grant defines confirmation bias very simply: **"seeing what we expect to see"**. We only perceive that which fits in our expectations, and our minds disregard everything else, often without us even noticing that's happening. So these folks know Jesus died. They likely watched it happen. From their perspective: once people are put in tombs, they don't come back. There's not any expectation to see that happen, so **perhaps they couldn't perceive Jesus because they had no mental framework** for him to be present.
6. In similar ways, as we navigate disorienting circumstances in our own lives, we may struggle to perceive the Divine in the midst of the complex realities we're facing. We may get stuck in our own trauma loops, that can block our perception of experiences of grace. Or we may be limited by our set of expectations that make it hard to see anything

outside of our mental frameworks. Which brings me to the next thing I notice happening in the story.:

B. The Divine invites us to ponder complicated realities in new, life giving ways.

1. In the story, Jesus starts by meeting his friends where they're at. He's not annoyed that they don't recognize him - he may actually be a bit amused by it, yet he comes close to them, patiently listening to their story, asking them questions, and hearing where they're stuck.
2. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He doesn't enter into their despair. They feel like their road map has been destroyed. Like they've hit a dead end in the maze and can't see a way forward. But **Jesus offers a different perspective.**
3. He actually razzes them a bit; calls them "foolish". I don't think this is meant to be rude or judgmental, but I hear it as a gentle chiding at their sense of defeat. Jesus is inviting them to think differently. He wants them to imagine another perspective; to consider a different point of view that transforms how they understand the reality they're in the midst of. It's a perspective that Zooms out further than the moment they are in and is grounded in a bigger, deeper story.
4. I referenced **organizational psychologist Adam Grant** a bit ago when talking about confirmation bias. A lot of his work is involved how to help people overcome it - how to help us think differently. The title of a recent book of his is "**Think Again**". Grant names how difficult it can be for many of us, especially as adults to consider something from a different perspective - to unlearn and relearn a new way. We often get stuck defending our ideas rather than examining them with curiosity and revising them when needed. The ability to think *again*, however, to incorporate new perspectives and information, opens up the possibility of growth and even new breakthroughs of innovation. It can help us find new pathways through the maze, you could say.
5. Telling the story from another perspective is also an important tool in trauma recovery. As those who've studied trauma in the brain have come to understand, in order to break the loop, **it's helpful for the mind to build a new neural pathway for the experience**, one that makes some sort of meaning of the event and integrates it into a bigger story. This help the mind not to forget the trauma, but come to terms with it in a way that brings resolution, healing and freedom.
6. As Jesus shares his unique perspective with the two on the road, as he shares his interpretation of their scriptures, he's doing something similar for them. He's inviting them to think again, to break out of their expectations. He's giving them **a bigger narrative** to ground their experience in, so that they might move forward beyond it.
7. The result is transformative. Without perhaps fully understanding what is happening, the friends recognize something is shifting as Jesus reframes their reality with his perspective on their tradition and his place in it. Later they describe hearing him speak this way, like feeling their "**hearts burn within them**". When we allow ourselves to be transformed in how we think and make meaning, it's an experience that impacts our whole being - mind, spirit, and body.
8. The experience these friends are having in the midst of the conversation is **so powerful they don't want it to end**. When Jesus makes like he intends to keep walking, they beg him to stay with them, to join for an evening meal. And this moment brings me to the last thing I want to point out from this story.

C. Communal practice has a unique ability to reveal the sacred.

1. In other words: **doing stuff together can help us see God.**

2. It's finally in the experience of sharing a meal, hearing Jesus bless the bread and the cup that his identity becomes clear to them. In that moment, their eyes are opened.
 3. I don't think this is just a coincidence. I think it points to a reality than many of us perhaps in this room have experienced to be true. There's something about the practice of **connecting with others in the midst of our maze experiences** that can sometimes help reveal the Divine's closeness in a way nothing else can. It's helpful to do stuff together.
 4. In the ancient myth, Theseus had a different outcome than everyone else because he was **relationally connected to Ariadne**. You could say that her scarlet thread represented her connection to him - even though she wasn't physically present with him, there was a relationship that was tying him to the world outside the maze and helping him find his way back there.
 5. In a similar way, our practices of community - from gathering to worship together, to joining for brunch in small groups once a month like we're currently doing, to calling folks to pray when we're in distress, or finding other ways to gather and connect can be **powerful tools for drawing us back from the heart of the maze** where we are facing the monsters of our own anxiety or despair. Often, it is in the midst of that connection that we can most easily **identify the presence of the Divine and imagine new pathways forward**.
 6. This is the reason that I think **so many of us are here**. Though we've been disillusioned by experiences of church in the past, though perhaps we've had our own mental maps torn apart by disappointment and trauma, though we rightly ask questions about if we can be safe in spiritual community, especially if we have been harmed by community in the past, still we **find ourselves drawn to connect with others and seek connection with God**. That's why we seek a Haven; that's why we work to make one with one another, and to welcome others who are seeking a space of healing and reconnection. Because **we have seen too much**; we've experienced the tug of a thread calling to us, telling us we're not abandoned in the maze. We want to cultivate **more of those moments of revelation** where in the presence of others we can more easily see God himself, breaking bread with us, offering us companionship and nourishment as we journey our path forward.
- D. Friends, **there was a time in my experience of young faith when I expected that walking with Jesus would mean I'd always see clearly**; that I'd always know with confidence which path to take when there was a fork in the road. That I could be assured that my path, even if it was challenging to walk at times, would be graced with clarity.
1. But my experience through the years **hasn't really born that out**. For me, **there have been moments that have felt clear**; moments when things came together and I felt a sense of sacred purpose and confidence that the Divine was present in a clear way, giving me a sense of direction or nourishing me in the midst of the journey. But those moments, like the moment of clarity Jesus' friends experienced in the story, **those are often fleeting**. They happen however briefly, however gloriously and then inevitably, moments later I find myself back in the challenge of my life maze, back in a puzzle filled with complexity and uncertainty, where I'm trying to hold on to the insights of those clear moments and navigate forward with wisdom, curiosity and faith. My maze doesn't have minotaurs, but I'm aware of the monsters facing myself, my loved ones, those around me - the monsters of disease, depression, economic inequality, racism, oppression and more.

2. I no longer journey in faith because I expect a clear path through the maze. I journey because **ultimately, in those fleeting moments of clarity, I have sensed the hope that there is something to hold onto beyond the maze.** The hope for me of the Easter resurrection story is a story of hope beyond the maze - a hope beyond the minotaur. That is the hope we are proclaiming when we proclaim that Jesus is risen - that we are not doomed simply to wander this life until it's monsters devour us. No, this is the hope that we, too, like Jesus, are made for something more - a resurrection life of connection, of meaning, of healing, of liberation, of justice, of joy. May we glimpse that hope more and more as we gather together, as we connect, as we sing, as we pray, as we consider Scripture, as we break bread and practice together, may we find the one beyond the maze present with us here as we do. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Does your life ever feel like a maze? In what way? What kind of "monster"s do you fear there?
2. How have your experiences in the maze made it harder to perceive the Divine? What have you found made connecting with God easier?
3. What does hope beyond the maze look like for you?