

You know, I was thinking this week

about how much I am really starting to enjoy this time of year.

My husband and I are now entering our third summer at our house.

I think I may have finally figured out how to take care of our roses.

Thankfully, they are a more forgiving plant than they are given credit.

In recent weeks, I have moved a couple and added a couple.

We also moved a few other plants around that haven't died yet.

I planted a vegetable garden

and have figured out how to keep the dog from running through it
and tearing everything up, well, most of the time.

Todd has become a grass growing genius.

He keeps our yard looking like a well-manicured fairway.

It's kind of fun getting to sit on our deck
and watch things grow and change.

But as I talk about this time of year

and all the growth I enjoy in my yard,

I am reminded that we really have entered a season of growth.

Of course, we have growth in our outside lives, so to speak

But also here in the church,

we have just entered the long green season after Pentecost.

And while growth is good and worth celebrating –

don't we all look forward to weddings and graduations of all kinds.

Growth can also be frightening.

Change, even change that we look forward to, is rarely easy.

Often when our circumstances change

we have to deal with things that take a lot of time and energy.

Things like changing classrooms, different schools,
meeting new people, a new work environment,
being forced to give up things we enjoy,
moving, job transitions,
saying many goodbyes before our next set of hellos can begin.

During growth times, as we go through changes,
we can get caught up in the waves of emotions
that seem to hit us repeatedly.

Sadness, abandonment, feeling anxious and alone
– no matter how many others are changing with us
or have gone through the changes before us –
it can still feel like we are experiencing everything on our own
for the very first time ever in history.

We get stuck in our own stuff;
unable to see anything beyond the walls
we build to hedge ourselves in for protection.

Until something comes along,
gets our attention and gets our focus outside of our own concerns.
Before that something comes along,
we may feel lost and afraid,
abandoned and lonely,
desperate and hopeless.

And let's be honest,
even though we often feel like the one and only person
struggling with change,
this has been going on for generations and generations.

In our story from Luke this evening/morning,

we get a glimpse into a seemingly desperate and hopeless situation.
As the story begins we meet two traveling groups
both in the midst of change.

They are at the edge of a city both journeying through change.
One group has just witnessed a death.

The other group has just witnessed a miracle.
The first group has gathered to mourn with a woman
whose only son has died.

The other group is following Christ
who just healed a nonbeliever's employee.
One group is supporting a friend, a neighbor, a family member
- a woman who is no stranger to loss.

The other is rallying around the only Son of God
who is going from town to town
preaching God's grace and restoring communities.

And here at the edge of a town the two groups collide.

And what an interesting collision that must have been.

For the group of mourners,
they would have been in the midst of a ritual procession.
An important final journey to support and lift up
a woman in their community going through
a terrible time of transition and grief.

Her only son has just died.

But, this isn't the first time she has suffered a loss.

Her husband died sometime before.

As was the custom of the day, shortly following her son's death;

family, friends and neighbors gathered to lend their support.
They helped her go through those final practices of loving her child.
They helped her make final arrangements
and prepare to take his lifeless body outside the city gates for burial.
This was her final goodbye before saying hello to a different way of life.
One where her future was unknown,
her means and way of living unclear
and her lifestyle was about to change dramatically.
And on their way to this final goodbye,
this group of mourners meets another group -
a much different group going through a very different journey.
While the first traveling group is led by a coffin,
the other is lead by Jesus.
This group has just come from witnessing a miracle.
This is a gathering of disciples
and many other unnamed masses surrounding Jesus.
Following him to watch and learn,
to hear more about God and to see this amazing man at work.
He is healing people - bringing life to the lifeless and hope to the hopeless.
One can only imagine their exuberance and excitement
following him and watching this ministry unfold
and grow throughout their journey.
And then the two groups meet.
One group facing a terrible, awful transition
and the other going through growth and new life.
One group mourning death and the other celebrating faith.
Here, at the edge of the city

– one group leaving the other entering the two journeys intersect.
And at the crossroads, we find Jesus. And there he does the unthinkable.
In his compassion he tells this woman who has lost her son to stop crying.
Then he reaches out and touches her son's coffin.
For those watching, this act of kindness would have been vile.
Jesus would have been declared unclean
according to the customs of the day.
This was just not what you did in the midst of a funeral procession.
Jesus, moved with compassion,
reaches into the very heart of this gathering's pain and suffering.
He stretches out his hand, touches the coffin,
the vessel crafted to contain death and cries out for new life.
“Young man, I say to you rise!” Jesus commanded.
And then he did.
Jesus restored this man to his mother.
He restored his life and her hope.
And as an outside observer to this reunion
we get the chance see a great intersection, a wonderful transition.
We get to stand at this crossroads
where death and faith have met and hope is born.

Where death and faith meet, hope is born.
That was true for those two groups in the gospel lesson
and it is true for us today.
In the midst of our changes, both small and large,
we are confronted with death over and over again.
Whether that is an actual death of a loved one

or the death of a relationship,
the end of school year or a phase of our life.

And we don't have to look very far to find those endings.

Here at Epiphany, we are dealing with a number of changes.

In coming weeks, we will say goodbye to our worship director
that we have enjoyed for 4 and a half years
as he goes off to internship.

Then we will wish the Wiese family well

as they move to Georgia and begin their next chapter in life.

After nearly fourteen years with Pastor Fritz's delightful leadership with us.

Following those transitions,

we will say goodbye to our rental space at the Leather Gallery
and the Springboro Campus will become the Austin Campus.

Endings and change surround us.

But as followers of Christ, death and changes are never the final ends,

but a stops on the journey.

Where Christ is present, faith abounds.

Where faith and death meet, hope is born.

New life is given and mourning is transformed into rejoicing.

Wherever Jesus goes there is hope and new life.

And this hope isn't just built on one who performs miracles,
but on the one who by his death and resurrection
has defeated death once and for all.

This hope is built on God's gift of faith given freely in the waters of baptism
and strengthened throughout our lives as followers of Christ.

Especially in this place where Jesus still leads our gathering,
transforming bread and wine into his own body and blood.

Transforming our lives with his forgiveness and encouraging us on the journey.

And in the midst of our changes and transitions,

let us be encouraged by the good news that Jesus is still here!

Jesus is still here.

We are still being gathered as those called to witness his miracles.

And do you know what I see when I look out at this congregation?

I see a group of people gathered to follow Christ.

A group of people journeying with Christ out ahead of us,

leading us to desperate situations,

where people can only see death

and calling us as a people of faith to offer hope.

In our life together,

we are called to go to the edge of the city

where mourning and faith meet.

Where those with faith meet those without hope.

And in those cross roads we are called to act.

We are called to give of ourselves,

to meet people where they are and to offer hope built on Christ.

That call will look differently at different times.

This may look like going to goodbye parties,

helping transition a new staff member

and helping those of us that remain adjust to new responsibilities.

It may mean helping transition one campus to another

and being sensitive to that intense change.

But our call to be faithful and hope-filled doesn't end here.

In other areas of our lives, growth and change is abundant.

Just like plants in a garden, as people are shifted, moved around,
uprooted and replanted we need extra care.

As those gathered to follow Christ, we are called to offer hope.

Not to be hope, but to point to the one who is hope,
trusting that in Jesus

we have everything we need and more.

We are called to go to those places of change and transition boldly,
to bear with one another and not isolate ourselves.

To go to the edge of the city, where the situations are desperate
and point to new life in the name of Christ. Amen.