Easter 3—Year A
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

I can't keep up. Four weeks ago, 6 dead in **Nashville** in the **Covenant School shooting**—152 rounds fired.[i] Two weeks ago, 5 dead and 9 wounded in **Louisville** in a shooting at **Old National Bank**.[ii] **One week ago**, 4 dead and 28 wounded in a shooting in **Dadeville, Alabama**—they were attending a 16th birthday party.[iii] That **same night**, back in **Louisville**, 2 killed and 4 wounded as a gunman fired into a crowd gathered in **Chickasaw Park**.[iv] That was two mass shootings in Louisville *in the same week*. This **past Wednesday**, in **Bowdoin, ME**, a man released prison on April 14th killed his parents and his parents' two friends and went on to wound three more as he fired at others on a busy interstate highway. On the day he was released from prison, he was so looking forward to seeing people. It is reported that the day before he unleashed this violence, he posted an anguished two-minute Facebook Live *"criticizing people who he said are Christian and don't give people a second chance. 'What good does it do to hate somebody?' he said, choking back tears, 'You know, it destroys you.'"*[v] As one who follows Jesus, that gives me pause.

And all of these mass shootings as we, here in the **High Country, approach the 2nd anniversary of our own tragic mass shooting**.

The community I live in has suffered a mass shooting; the community I'm from has suffered more than one.

Gun violence is now the leading cause of death for our children—surely this is not the world that God dreams for us.[vi]

We have made guns into our golden calf*, and this golden calf won't save us,* ***nor will it help us with our fear any more than it helped the Israelites with theirs****.*

Ten days ago, in **Kansas City, Ralph Yarl**, a 16-year old black young man, was shot in the head and the arm by an 84-year old white man. *Ralph's crime*, he'd gone to the wrong house as he tried to pick up his younger twin siblings. Miraculously, Ralph is now recovering at home.[vii] **Two days later**, a 20-year old young woman, **Kaylin Gillis**, was shot and later died in **upstate New York**. *Her crime*, she and her 3 friends were trying to go to another friend's house in rural Hebron, NY—they mistakenly pulled up the wrong driveway, realized their error, and were turning around their car when the homeowner fired on them.[viii] This **past Tuesday, in Elgin, TX**, a car with **two cheerleaders** was fired upon. *Their crime*, they had just returned from practice and dropped off two of their friends in a supermarket parking lot. One of them mistakenly got into the wrong car thinking it was theirs. She saw a man in the passenger seat, realized her mistake, and retreated into her friend's car. She saw the man approach their vehicle and rolled down the window to apologize when the man started shooting. Two of the young women were shot and injured, one critically so—18 years old.[ix] And then, also on **this past Tuesday**, less than 2 hours from here in **Gaston County, NC**, a **6-year old child and her parents** were shot and wounded. *The crime here?* Some children were playing basketball and the ball rolled into a man's yard. They came to retrieve it, and the man went in and got his gun and started shooting. The three injured weren't connected to the basketball incident, the parents were outside grilling and the little girl was riding her bike.[x]

We have lost our minds. We have lost our minds.

And I'm preaching about this today to **make sure that we don't lose our hearts** because that is the great temptation. The great temptation is that we grow numb to these events, that we accept that *this is just the way it is*. It happens so frequently now that our minds can no longer take it in, and the temptation is that our hearts grow cold and hard to it because to let this much tragic, unnecessary death and violence in *would break us*.

No, as the people of God, we cannot give into this temptation.

We cry out with the **psalmist**, **"The cords of death have entangled us; the grip of the grave has taken hold of us; we have come to grief and sorrow."**

We **stand with the crowd in the Acts of the Apostles when confronted by Peter** about **this Jesus whom *we* have crucified**, and we allow this truth to **cut us to the heart**, and then we ask, **"Brothers, what should we do?"** And we wrestle with **what our baptism *actually* means**; we wrestle with what it means *that* **we've been given the gift *and* power of the Holy Spirit**; we wrestle with what it means *that* **God's promise is for us and for our children and for those who are *far away***; and we wrestle with what it means to **save ourselves from this corrupt generation**, what it means to **seek wholeness amidst this madness that is killing us**, *literally*.

We *take seriously* the testimony in **I Peter** that **we have been *ransomed* from these futile ways that we've inherited from our ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, *or guns*, but with the precious blood of Christ poured out to drain the power of violence away and fill *that* abyss with a love that is fearless and relentless**.

We **trust in God** who can **raise life out of all this senseless death,** and **we set our trust and hope *there***. We **give our obedience to *this* truth** and ***not*** to **the forces who tell us that there's not a thing we can, or should, do about this**. And **from that place**, ***we go deeper***; we **discover the power of genuine mutual love**, we **discover the power of loving one another deeply from this heart that God has quickened**, and we **allow ourselves to be born anew, not of perishable seed that only knows how to fear** and **guard** and **protect**, but of **imperishable seed that knows that our hope** and **grounding** and **security are not of this world**.

It's okay that these events overwhelm us; how could they not? We are like **those two walking on the road to Emmaus talking about and discussing these things**. We've **got to tell these stories**, and **Jesus has come alongside us, though it's so hard to recognize him**. **Our sadness is swamping us**, but **he wants to hear what is stirring in our hearts**. *It's even okay if we look at him and say,* **"Are you the only one who doesn't know the things that have taken place in these recent days?"** *as long as we tell the story*. **Jesus knows our hearts have grown slow**, and he knows that, *if we just don't turn away*, **he can breathe life into them again**. And once we've spoken our piece, **we have to let Jesus speak his**.

We have to **let him point us back to the prophets and all those places in our tradition that lift our eyes to see from a new perspective**. We need to **invite him to stay longer with us**. We need to **come to the table and eat a meal with him**, watch him as he **takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it into our hands**, and **let him open our eyes to recognize him**. And, *even as he vanishes from our sight*, to **trust that he has set our hearts burning, and it's up to us to do something with all this passion he's *literally* poured into us.**

Our crucified Lord has been raised from the dead; death no longer has dominion over him [Romans 6:9], **and it's time that we claim the power of this resurrection life and say *"Enough!"* to the forces of fear and death.**

There is a way forward, and it just may be those of us with burning hearts that can point the way.

Can *we* **shift the conversation**? Can *we* **find new language**? Could *we* begin to talk about a **harm reduction approach when it comes to guns** and **gun violence**? We get caught in this **death spiral around language**, and it gets all tied up in a **contest of rights and a fight for control**. How might a frame of **harm reduction** open up new and creative possibilities and solutions?

In what universe does it make sense to **drop permits** and **allow people to buy and have guns with no training**? You have to take driver's education and pass a test to drive a car—why, because it's a big, powerful machine that can be lethal to you and others.

In the name of our Lord who, when under threat himself, **told his disciples to put away their sword** [Matthew 26:52]: Could we agree that **assault weapons** are weapons of war and have no place in our communities? Could we acknowledge that **high capacity magazines** give a shooter intent on inflicting carnage a greater capacity to fire many more rounds in far less time?

Could we seek the **wisdom of responsible gun owners to build a culture that honors the Second Amendment** *and also teaches* a **deep commitment to safety and an equal honoring of life**? Most responsible gunowners hold fiercely to such values.

Could we, with **steadfast determination**, **proclaim** to our **elected officials** that **doing nothing is *not* acceptable**? Could we demand that **they, *all of them*, lay aside their entrenched positions** and **work *together* for the sake of *our life together***?

Could **our burning hearts take us *even deeper***? Could we commit, as the **people of God**, to **learn the skills of violence *prevention*, de-escalation, and mediation**? I heard a show this week that spoke of community members who get trained as **violence interrupters**[xi]—that sounds like holy work to me.

And maybe the first step to being a **violence interrupter starts with being a fear interrupter**. How can we, as **people of faith**, **step in and interrupt the cycle of fear that has consumed our society**? How do we **humanize one another and do *our* part to knit back together the frayed fabric of our communal life at every level**?

With our burning hearts, could we **double-down on a commitment** to **recognize someone in the gun debate, whom you perceive to be as far away from you as possible, as the human being that they are *and* to hold fiercely to your common humanity *with* them**? Could you **buck the outrage that is pedaled from the left *and* the right and refuse to cede this other person's inherent dignity**?

Could you even **imagine seeing them as a fellow traveler on the road to Emmaus and talk about, discuss, these things with them**? Could you **refuse the cynicism that says**, ***"Nothing will ever change?"*** and instead, **believe that, within them *and* within you, lie hearts who long for a different way**?

Could we **work on the roots of violence**? Commit to the **long-haul work of melting fear with a love that is fiercer**, **persevere in rooting out the evil of racism, ethnic hatred, religious animosity,** and **the targeting of others for identities** that may be outside our understanding and experience?

Could our burning hearts take us *deeper still* and address, *on every level*, the **profound mental health needs across our society *at every level***? That's what a group of people have been doing in the **High Country ever since the tragic shooting in *our* community**. The **Community Mental Health Project** meets monthly across all the agencies in our community, including the police, to work on **identifying gaps and getting resources into the hands of those who most need them so that people can get help before it erupts in violence** and **to shatter stigma concerning mental health** and **addiction**—several in the St. Luke's community are actively involved in this effort. Again, **how do we knit people back into the fabric of community *so that* they can *reach for a person* who sees their dignity and their worth *instead of reaching for a gun*?**

We may have lost our minds, *but we cannot lose our hearts*. In this Easter season, as **Christ breathes life back into our hearts again and sets them burning within**, maybe we can *even come to see* that **losing our minds is the *necessary* precursor to putting on the mind of Christ**. ***Only then*** will we **see the way forward and shed these cords of death that have entangled us**.

Christ is risen from the dead; death no longer has dominion over him. When will we **join him** and **proclaim** with **every word** and **every deed** and **every precious breath** that **death no longer has dominion over us either**? Amen.

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St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
April 23, 2023

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[i] Covenant School Shooting--Nashville, TN
[ii] Old National Bank Shooting--Louisville, KY
[iii] 16th Birthday Party Shooting--Dadeville, AL
[iv] Chickasaw Park Shooting--Louisville, KY
[v] Maine Shooting--Bowdoin, ME
[vi] Current Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States
[vii] Ralph Yarl Shooting--Kansas City, MO
[viii] Kaylin Gillis Shooting--Hebron, NY
[ix] Cheerleader Shooting--Elgin, TX
[x] 6-Year Old and Parents Shooting--Gaston County, NC
[xi] 1a--The pragmatism of community violence prevention programs