

While We Wait: Easter Goes for a Walk
Luke 24: 13-35

Last Sunday afternoon I indulged in a post-Easter activity shared by clergy around the globe. I took a nap, a long nap of deep sleep. There is always a bit of a letdown after holidays like Easter, after days of deep emotion. We pour ourselves into the preparation and festivities and experience the moment in all its fulness. When it concludes, we are brought to a stop. Now what? What do you do when the activities cease, when the food has all been eaten, when you are finally home in the quiet? That is somewhat where the followers of Jesus found themselves after all the intensity of those last days in Jerusalem. The reality was beginning to sink in that Jesus, their leader and friend, was truly dead and gone. They were rudderless, like sheep without a shepherd, unsure of their purpose, uncertain about the future. Two of those followers, one of whom was named Cleopas, decided to go for a walk to the village of Emmaus, a short distance from Jerusalem. Other than knowing these were not part of the original twelve, we know little about Cleopas and his unnamed companion. We know nothing about the reason for the trip to Emmaus. We are not even sure where Emmaus was located. But like humans across time, after all they had witnessed and experienced they felt a need to be alone for a bit, to talk about all that had happened, to wonder about their precarious future. According to Luke, it was the same day the women had discovered the empty tomb. As we heard in last week's Easter story, they had arrived at the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with precious spices and oils. Though they had heard his promise about returning again, though angels had told them Jesus was alive, there was the stark reality of an empty tomb with little explanation about what happened. So they walked, they talked, they mourned and despaired, they wondered. What now?

Though Easter itself was last week, it launched a new era in the church calendar. It is a liturgical season spanning from Easter morning to Pentecost, an in-between time in which the disciples were reeling from the emotions of Jesus' horrifying death, unsure about the future, not

clear at all on what it meant to be followers without Jesus physically present. During those fifty days Jesus appeared to them, walked and talked with them, shared meals, and continued to prepare them for a tomorrow they had never anticipated. For us as part of the Body of Christ, it is also a moment of wisdom for us to explore what it means to be people of a resurrection faith when the world has been turned inside out and upside down, when our hopes have been dashed, and when what lies ahead is obscured from our vision. When I was in Oregon at a transitional ministry conference last month, I learned a Latin phrase, *solvitur ambulando*, 'it will be solved in the walking'. That is exactly what we are going to do over the next few weeks. We are going to take a walk through faith and seek the path to which God is calling us.

As the two walked along the dusty road to Emmaus, a stranger came up and asked what they were discussing. I am not sure I would welcome such an interruption, especially when my emotions were dominated by grief and confusion. 'Southern nice' would not be my first reaction! Maybe it was because of their sorrow, maybe it was a cultural phenomenon, but the two disciples did respond with an answer, one that showed their fragile anguish. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"¹ How could anyone in Jerusalem *not* know what had happened? Despite their heartache they went on to explain about Jesus, the betrayal that led to his arrest, his brutal death, and the perplexity of an empty tomb. Their answer was complex, loaded with feelings and meaning. Using language reminiscent of prophets such as Moses and Elijah, they told of Jesus as "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people."² They shared their own sense of betrayal that "*our* chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him."³ As they continued to pour out their pain and misery, they told this total stranger of the puzzle of an empty tomb and visions of angels. Pervading their narrative was a deep-seated sense of loss and disappointment. "But we had hoped that

¹ Luke 24: 18 NRSV

² Luke 24: 19b NRSV

³ Luke 24: 20 NRSV

he would be the one to redeem Israel."⁴ We had hoped. We had hoped, and now all our dreams and expectations of promise and salvation were shattered, left to die on the cross with Jesus.

Such is our history, a cycle of hope and death, with the promises of tomorrow shattered by violence today, followed by other voices that life holds more than the present. Fifty years ago the brother of an assassinated president broke the news of another shocking murder just two months before he himself would be killed at the hands of hatred. Wearing his brother's overcoat, Robert Kennedy told an angry crowd in Indianapolis of the death of civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. For so many people, King was an embodied hope that there could be justice in this world, that people could indeed be judged by their character and not the color of their skin, that freedom could be a reality for everyone. And with a single shot from a rifle, that hope was silenced. There could have been more violence in Indianapolis that day, but instead the group of people gathered there listened to Kennedy, to his call to continue walking on the road laid out by King and so many others:

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization ... filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love. What we need ... is not division; what we need ... is not hatred; what we need ... is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer⁵

Kennedy reminded them all of the central core of King's calling - to become people of love, compassion, grace, and justice. That was what Jesus did on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter day. With patience, with compassion, with love, he re-told the story, his story.

As they approached Emmaus in the waning hours of the day, in an example of the very hospitality that Jesus taught, the two, still unaware of Jesus' identity, asked him to stay with

⁴ Luke 24: 21a NRSV

⁵ Robert F. Kennedy. Speech given in Indianapolis, Indiana. April 4, 1968.

<https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Statement-on-the-Assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King.aspx>

them. It was then, as they shared a simple meal together, that all the chaotic devastation of the last few days fell away as they finally recognized that Jesus had been walking with them all along. The walk to Emmaus became more than a simple movement from one point to another but a reenactment of what it meant to be Church. It was a journey of companionship, of learning and listening, of grieving and rejoicing, of experiencing the fire of God in their hearts, of choosing to solve the problem by walking together with compassion and love.

In the earliest days after Jesus' death the movement of his followers was known simply as 'the way', a reflection of the journey of faith we all make together. For we are still on the way, still walking the road. Millions have walked before us, many are on the road with us now, many more will follow. We have not committed ourselves to a stagnant, stationary God but to a dynamic God who calls us to go on the road - to walk and talk, to listen and learn about our faith, to tell others, to be the love of God. It is in walking this road together that we discover ourselves, that we discover the beauty of God's creation in the world, that we become the community God calls us to be.

Easter is but the beginning of the resurrection story. Easter is not a 'he is risen, alleluia, let's go home and be about our lives' experience. Easter lives on and walks in us and with us. Easter is not a one-time 'victory over sin and death' celebration. Easter is instead participation in making the hope of love and compassion a reality in our world. Emmaus reminds us the walk continues. It originated in companions sharing a swirl of emotions - doubt, confusion, grief, a tremendous sense of loss, paralysis on what to do next. Ordinary people with ordinary emotions such as we experience every day. Filled with renewed belief in what could be, they continued walking the road as did the followers of King who refused to let his legacy die, as do we. Today we come together in this place to share our lives. We listen and learn, we open our hearts and doors to strangers, we become aware of God in even, maybe especially, in the most ordinary of life experiences. We are still on the road to Emmaus, and we do have choices on how we will walk the path before us. In light of the blatant lies we hear daily, the rallying cries

for polarization and isolation, the self-centered xenophobia that falsely asserts a superiority over others, we could easily fall back into fear, huddled behind our walls and lashing out with words of hatred and division. Or we could solve the problem by walking the road together. We can retell the story of Jesus and his radical, passionate love for all people that stood in quiet defiance before the established faith of his time, even before the full power of the mighty Roman Empire. We understand that the Easter story began in swirling clouds of doubt, fear, and grief, clouds that still cast shadows over our own lives today. As the disciples came together in the aftermath of death, they discovered that hope had not died on a hill named Golgotha. Together they could not only reclaim the hope of which Jesus spoke, they could be hope for one another and for the world. So do we begin to understand that resurrection lives on in us today and that the heavy darkness of the now cannot and will not define the hope for tomorrow.

Easter sneaks into our hearts quietly, daring us to believe beyond what we can see or touch or feel, urging us to reach through the muck and mire of the day and allow God's grace to transform us. Then with a kernel of hope within our hearts together we walk down the road to discover who we can become as the Church, the presence of God in the world.

Let us pray.

God of creation, as we move toward new visions and dreams, as we step out on a path that is as yet unknown to us, awaken in us a fire to know you more fully and to walk this road together as your own. Grant us an awareness of you traveling with us now and always in the legacy of the past, in those who walk with us even now, and in your future that beckons us to come and follow you. Amen.

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