

“The Emmaus walk”

Luke 24:13-35 (April 23, 2023)

Does it surprise you to learn that we are still celebrating Easter? Isn't it time we moved on?

Well, maybe ... except that *every* Sunday in the Christian Church is meant to be a “Little Easter.” It was the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, that early Christians gathered together to tell a story, share a meal, and find encouragement for their walk of faith. Though many Sundays have come and gone, we're still telling the Easter story.



This morning's scripture passage is about two disciples travelling from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village about 7 miles away. They're walking. Together. Which is a wonderful image for what it means to be the church! We are walking together, sharing our journey of faith.



As I pondered this story through the week, what struck me was the *way* they were walking. When I picture this scene unfolding, I see those two disciples starting off very slowly. And then, as the story progresses, their pace begins to change. I'll say more about that as we continue.

But for now, imagine them plodding along the road? It's Easter evening. But these two disciples have yet to be energized by the Easter story. On the contrary, the events of that day have left them discouraged and confused.



I had to smile on Thursday morning, when the ground was covered with snow. Our neighbours across the street have a small dog. That morning I watched as they went for their morning walk. The dog was straggling far behind. The leash was getting longer and longer. Its head was down and its tail was not wagging.

After several days of beautiful springtime weather, Odie (that's the dog's name) looked quite dejected at the prospect of walking in the snow. I guess he didn't see the forecast, that it would soon melt.

The two disciples travelling the road to Emmaus are dejected. We find them trudging along, lifting one foot in front of the other. They are people in grief.

It began with the Passover meal. Then the arrest, followed by interrogations, a sham trial, and a terrible, painful, humiliating death. How does one make sense of that? Like so many things in our lives, we struggle to fathom what it could mean.



But at least they had each other. They were travelling companions, partners on this journey. What a gift that is! You *do* know that, don't you? Here in the church, we have each other. And that is not nothing!

I can imagine them going over the last few days talking, listening. Caring well for each another. That's what we do when someone near to us is going through a difficult time. We go to visit, we call, we speak, we listen. We walk together through whatever dark valley we are in.

The Christian Church, at its most basic, any maybe its very best, is about companionship. “We are pilgrims on a journey, we are trav’lers on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”¹



And please notice the companion who comes along beside them. A mysterious stranger, who’s not really a stranger at all. But they do not recognize him.

“What are you discussing with each other,” he asks. He wants them to say, though he probably knows already. He invites these two to share their burden.

And now we observe that their walking has stopped. The last part of verse 17 is very poignant in its description: “They stood still, looking sad.” They stood still.



And when I read that I think: this sorrow they’re carrying is so heavy that, in order to explain it, they have to stop walking altogether. It takes all their energy to express their pain. “They stood still, looking sad.”



Jesus invites them to tell their story. And they do. A story “about Jesus of Nazareth,” they say, “who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people ... “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” We *had* hoped. But not any more. Their hope has been dashed on the hill of Calvary, the place of the skull.

Those words, “we had hoped” – how familiar they are to us. How well we know them! When expectations are dead and cherished dreams are dashed. We had hoped the tumour wasn’t malignant. We had hoped the depression would lift. We had hoped the marriage would last. We had hoped the church wouldn’t close. We had hoped to have more time together in our lives. We had hoped for a different outcome.²

But there it is. Jesus, are you still listening?



The travellers have stopped walking. They’re not going anywhere. Their loss of hope is so overwhelming. And I don’t know if you can sense this or not, but what I see here is a great danger – that faith itself is teetering on the brink.

Everything points toward it. They’ve already left Jerusalem and the other disciples, abandoning their call from God, and the Kingdom hopes that Jesus had stirred within them. At this dark and dangerous moment they’re confused, discouraged ... and on the verge of giving up.

I guess that some of *us* have been there too. So what is it that keeps us going, when we can barely take another step?

¹ “Will you let me be your servant,” Text by Richard Gillard, 1977, alt. Found at #307 in Hymnal: A Worship Good, c. 1992 by Mennonite Publishing House, Scottsdale, PA, USA.

² “But We Had Hoped,” by Debie Thomas. Posted 19 April 2020. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2616-but-we-had-hoped>, Accessed April 18, 2023.



There is a rumour, they say, circulated by some women. Something about a vision of angels who told them Jesus was alive. But who's to say? Just a rumour. Can you trust a thing like that?



Christ on the Road to Emmaus,
American 18th Century, circa 1725
/1730.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_on_the_Road_to_Emmaus_G-001552-20120605.jpg

At this point, the stranger who's been listening so patiently (a.k.a. Jesus) gets rather annoyed. He calls those two travellers "foolish and slow of heart." Then he starts at the beginning and sets their sad story in the much *larger* context of the story of God.

Jesus begins with Moses and the prophets and leads them bit by bit to a new understanding. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

Jesus tells the story a different way. And somehow the disciples begin to walk again! One of them takes a tentative step, and the other one follows. Then another step. Soon they're no longer still. They are moving!

They may not fully understand what Jesus is saying to them. There's so much to learn! But now there is a spark of something that's beginning to grow.

Later they would say amongst themselves: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"



Hearts burning! A spark bursting into flame, stirring a passion. Reviving a love you thought was gone, but it's not! The love of God in Jesus does *not* let us go.

You see there are times in our lives when our love for God is thin. Our faith is weak. But that is not what matters. It's not how much *we* hold onto God, but how firmly *God* holds onto us. *You* think your story is over. But it's not!



And see now how their pace begins to quicken? Without them even thinking about it. The time they're spending with Jesus goes so quickly, the miles disappear. So that before they know it they're at the village where they plan to spend the night. How did we get here so quickly?

"Come now, stranger, stay with us!" They don't want him to leave.



"The Supper at Emmaus," Jacob Jordaens
(1593–1678)

They sit together at the supper table. And there this stranger takes the bread, blesses the bread, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Where have they seen this before? It couldn't be! Is this Jesus? Is he now breaking bread with them?



Have you ever experienced one of those moments in your life when you finally get it? Finally understand what's happening? When doing long division clicks? When a puzzle is solved? When a name is remembered? When a face is recognized? Or when you realize

you're in love? We all have those Aha! moments. It was right before us all that time. How could we have missed it!

Breaking bread is still at the centre of our Christian community: Pascha bread, fruit and cheese. Pot lucks. I hear we may be sampling some Thai cuisine in the not-too-distant future! All of it rooted in the knowledge that Christ is with us in the breaking of bread.

Every time we gather at the table of the Lord, our fellowship with Christ is renewed and our faith is strengthened.



The journey for these two disciples is not finished. They thought it was. But it's not. "We have to go back," they say. Back to Jerusalem and the other disciples. We have to share with them what we have learned.

So they get up from the table, forfeiting any rest they had in mind. They strap on their sandals and head back out onto the road.

If I was a betting man I'd say they weren't just walking. No more plodding along as at the beginning. No more standing still. No more turning in for rest. This is the quickest 7 miles they've ever done! Thanks to a surge of adrenaline. And also the Holy Spirit.



So, in the dark of night, finally they stumble into the upper room where the others are gathered together. And there, reunited in that loving community of disciples, they tell their stories about the risen Lord.



I want to ask you about your journey of faith. Where are you in your walk of discipleship?



Are you plodding along, confused and discouraged? Are you stopped dead in your tracks, in danger of giving up? Are you listening, are you learning? Are you running to share Good News?

We can be in all these places at different times in our lives. Maybe not always in the place we *want* to be, or think we should be.

The important thing to remember is that we are not alone in any of it. We have one another. And that is a great blessing. Can you imagine trying to be faithful all by yourself, without the support and encouragement of a brother or sister in Christ?

The New Testament never speaks of individual Christians living the life of faith on their own. It speaks of a beloved community and a Kingdom where relationships run deep.



And the most important thing of all? Is it not that Christ shares this journey *with* us? There is a mysterious stranger who walks by our side. A stranger who knows us better than we ourselves. He is there. In our moving forward, in our standing still. Whether we recognize him or not!

The rumours are true! Christ is risen. And he is with us today and all our days. Thanks be to God!