

Easter Walk

Luke 24: 13-35

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina
April 8, 2018

Walking is all the rage. Everyone says we should be walking more. The Surgeon General, the CDC, the Mayo Clinic....they all are telling us how important a simple thirty minute walk is to our health. Some point to the days when many children walked to school and say they can correlate increasing child obesity to decreasing numbers of children walking to and from school. So walking is good for us. When I was told to give up running a decade ago because of back problems, I was a skeptic because walking (not running) didn't seem to be real exercise!

But walking is not for wimps, as a thirty-four year former British soldier proved a couple of years ago. It took Ed Stafford two years to walk the Amazon River from ocean to ocean, over four thousand miles. He was the first one to ever go the distance without the use of a boat. His walk included overcoming deadly snakes, fierce crocodiles, and a tribe of indigenous people who detained him overnight, interrogated him, and gave him a stern warning before letting him proceed on his Amazon adventure. He collapsed from exhaustion fifty miles from his coastal destination — but eventually recovered enough to finish his historic walk.

An article in the *New Yorker* recently touted that walking is tied to increased blood flow to the brain, and therefore, to better thinking. So apparently walking is also good for our brain health.

After we hear today's story from Luke, I think we will conclude that walking can be good for our spiritual health as well.

I

It's still Easter in Jerusalem. The women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and other women had earlier been to the tomb and found it empty. You remember they had been told by angels that Jesus had been resurrected which sent them running to the disciples to tell them the stunning, incredible news. But remember, the disciples thought the women were hysterical and their story nonsense, an idle tale. But Jesus began appearing to various people. He was loose in the streets and rumors of the stunning news of his resurrection began racing through parts of Jerusalem.

And out from Jerusalem, on this Easter afternoon, walking the road to Emmaus, are two of Jesus' followers. They are not part of his twelve disciples, but they are part of the extended group who believed Jesus was something special — from God, maybe the Messiah. These two are taking the seven-mile walk to the small village of Emmaus on the afternoon of the Resurrection.

As they are walking, a stranger comes up from behind and begins to walk with them. This stranger asks them what they are talking about, and they reply with something like, "Where you been man... on Mars? Are you the only one in Jerusalem who has not heard of the goings-on of the past few days?" Okay, that is my paraphrase.

Of course, we know the stranger is Jesus. However, these two followers don't recognize or realize who he is. Why? Well, it is only speculation here, but my guess is that the reasons are several: that Jesus as a resurrected man may have been altered in appearance. Or maybe it is that they cannot see what they don't believe. Or, that one has trouble seeing what one doesn't expect to see.

Jesus responds that he doesn't know what happened (obviously leading them on), and the two followers begin to tell Jesus of the recent events. Listen again to what they tell Jesus after he asked, "What things?"

The things about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet ... and how our leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and beside all of this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover some women of our group have astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he is alive. Some of the group who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.

At this point Jesus reminds them of the scriptures, interpreting his death according to those texts. Still, these two don't recognize Jesus.

When they reach Emmaus, Jesus walks on as if he is going ahead. But it is getting late, near dinner time, and the two followers invite Jesus to stay and have dinner. The stranger/Jesus accepts, and while they are at the table having dinner, Luke says, "Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

So what do you think about this? Here is what I am thinking: That there is a lesson here: One doesn't have to be in Jerusalem to experience Easter. And that it is often when we are on the road from one place to another that we encounter God.

II

Truth in life is always about being on the road from one place to another. We are never stationary but on the way ...

- On the way to completing or furthering our education.
- On the way to finding a partner or trying to improve the relationship between our partner.
- On the way to discovering a career that makes sense for us, a place where we can thrive.
- On the way to getting better at some skill.
- On the way to parenthood, and then figuring out what family and parenting are all about.
- On the way to an empty nest.
- On the way to making new friends after a move.
- On the way to discovering a new life after the death of a spouse, or someone dear to us, or after divorce.
- On the way to discovering a spiritual life that is more than church attendance.
- On the way to retirement and rethinking what this means for us.
- On the way as a congregation to discover what God has in mind for the next leg of this journey.

III

Life *is* being on the way from one place to another. Right? What's the saying? "Life is what happens while we are making other plans!" Yes. And some unexpected things happen to us while we are on the way from some place to another. That's what happened to the two Jesus-followers.

These two Jesus-followers were not on a joy walk on Easter afternoon. No, it seems something quite different. Some think these followers had abandoned ship because of all the chaos and unrest in Jerusalem. Some believe they were escaping Jerusalem because they were afraid of what was going to happen to anyone associated with Jesus because he had upset the religious and the political status quo. There was great fear that the Romans or the religious leadership would round them up, persecute and punish.

And we can also tell from their conversation that these two followers are disappointed by the events in Jerusalem. Remember they tell the stranger/Jesus, that Jesus was a mighty prophet who'd been condemned to death and crucified. And then they utter this very telling sentence: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

You see, with Jesus' death, they had lost their hope! They were *not* on this road looking for Jesus. For them the story was over. Their hopes had proven false. They were defeated and grieving and low.

So get this: What makes this story remarkable is how unremarkable it is. This story is not a road-to-Damascus story or a burning bush story. It is not *A Pilgrims Progress* story or Homer's *Odyssey* where there is a journey in search for home or truth. No. Rather, these followers could be called the ordinary, *nobodies* of the Jesus movement. Cleopas is the name of one, and the other follower goes unnamed. We don't know who Cleopas was. We never heard of them before this day and he is never mentioned again.

Which is to say, these two travelers on a walk symbolize any one of us. Their road to Emmaus is an ordinary road, the same road you and I walk every day.

But this is what makes this story more than intriguing, but compelling; it invites you and me to expect God to find us...on the ordinary road going from someplace to somewhere. I mean, these followers are not disciple stars or people of renowned faith or deep spirituality. But God meets them where they are on the way to someplace else. They are us.

IV

Often, one of the things that people on a spiritual quest do is to go on a pilgrimage. Now, I like the concept of pilgrimages. A pilgrim believes or hopes that a place will be a gateway to a deeper faith. It felt like a pilgrimage when I was in Israel, by the Sea of Galilee and in Jerusalem several years back. And spiritual seekers make journeys to Iona in Scotland, or Rome, or follow in the footsteps of Paul through Turkey and Greece. And then there is the famous pilgrimage walk through France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

But this is what I suspect: that we will more likely find Jesus in our own hometown, in the ordinary, of going from someplace to another. Or more likely, I am betting that *God will find* us and meet us *where we are* through such simple things as

- Prayer,
- A sermon,
- The words of a hymn,
- Reading scripture,
- A morning devotion,
- A conversation with a spiritual friend.

Easter is not over after Easter morning. Coming into contact with the risen Jesus often comes later..... So expect to be found on the way to someplace else. Expect that in our ordinary lives our risen Lord will join us unexpectedly.