

“Walking Ahead”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 11, 2021

2nd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 30

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 24:13-35

The Sunday after Easter is sometimes called “Low Sunday” – because church attendance notoriously takes a dip after the lilies are gone and the eggs are put away. But since we have had the same skeleton crew in the sanctuary for the last thirteen months, there isn’t a very noticeable difference. This day is also sometimes celebrated as “Holy Humor” Sunday: focusing instead on the ironic absurdity and surprise of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. God must have a sense of humor for this – a dead man raised to new life – to be the divine way of salvation.

One of the traditional post-resurrection stories told this day is the Walk to Emmaus. Here, we encounter a pair of disciples – one is unnamed and other, named Cleopas, is never mentioned anywhere else in the gospels. These are some of the “multitude of disciples” that Luke places at the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. In Luke’s Easter story, the women who go the tomb early in the morning, and find it is empty, report what they have seen to the twelve (now eleven) and “the others.” Since these two disciples walking on the road know about this report and seem to think – like the apostles – it is an “idle tale,” it’s quite likely they were present that morning.

It is now later in the day; our two “other” disciples are heading to Emmaus, a seven-mile walk from Jerusalem. It’s no accident that the first place the risen Jesus shows up in Luke is on a road. Journeying is a prominent motif throughout his two-volume work (the gospel and Acts). Repeatedly, Jesus meets people along the road; most notably with the conversion of Paul. Acts says that the first self-designation for the movement of Jesus-followers was not “Christians,” but people of “the Way.” Luke’s focus on travel – literal and figurative – serves as an apt metaphor for discipleship; following in Jesus’ footsteps.¹

¹ Michal Beth Dinkler from *WorkingPreacher.com*

It is a bit absurd that Cleopas and his friend cannot recognize the man they believed was the Messiah just three days before. The text actually says “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Who, or what, kept them from seeing the truth? Are they in shock from their grief? Has Jesus been transformed; has he decided to put on a wig and glasses as a disguise?

We really can't know for sure; but maybe the disciples cannot recognize Jesus – at least in part – because they think they already understand what is happening. Here's why I say this: Jesus asks the two what they are discussing. Cleopas responds, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has happened?” We cannot know his tone, but I imagine a hint of disdain: *Are you clueless? How can you NOT know?*

The disciples explain – to Jesus – that their teacher and friend Jesus has just died on a cross, and that because the women did not see him, their report must be false. All their hopes have been dashed. The scene is, of course, dripping with irony: Cleopas cannot see that he is describing his lost hope not to a stranger, but to the one in whom those hopes are fulfilled.

Their confusion and hopelessness is clear. “We had hoped...” indicates that to them what they imagined is no longer a reality. The grief and dismay that surrounded the crucifixion has affected these disciples deeply. They had been told repeatedly that Jesus would die and rise again. But, the news of the empty tomb was so shocking and contrary to their beliefs about Jesus' ministry that they simply didn't make sense. So now, on the road to Emmaus, what they had been taught was absent from their minds, and their eyes failed them.²

As they approach their destination, the two disciples notice that Jesus seems to be planning to keep walking – where he was headed, Luke does not tell us. They plead with Jesus to stay with them; offering hospitality to the one they still believe to be a stranger. They want to be hosts to their traveling companion and “new” friend.

But as soon as the table is set, Jesus reverses the expected social roles. He becomes the host by blessing the bread and sharing it. Remember, they still don't know that they are dining with Jesus again; they don't realize that their dashed hopes are going to be restored through the resurrected body of this “stranger.”³

² Michael Stidham, “The Open Table”

³ Eric Barretto from *WorkingPreacher.com*

One of the most characteristic activities of Jesus' ministry in Luke is eating. Early in the gospel, he is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard; worse than that, he chooses to eat with all the wrong people. So, it's instructive that it's not his teaching that opens their eyes; it's not his presence; it's sharing bread with his friends. Strangely enough, it's his acceptance of their hospitality and the blessing of their food.

For Luke, Jesus is maybe best revealed at the table; at an ordinary meal infused with significance because of the people who are gathered around the food. It is at the table the Jesus teaches his disciples about hospitality and service, about remembrance and acceptance. In Luke's gospel, eating is a radical act because it breaks down barriers. So, in feeding his followers, Jesus opens their eyes; helping them to see that Jesus was with them the whole time.

On the way to Emmaus, the disciples renewed faith leads them to act like Jesus even before they knew Jesus had risen. They welcome the stranger and open their table to him. And it is at this moment, when they imitate Jesus, that they recognize their Lord.

The Emmaus journey is sometimes called "the journey of every Christian." It contains so many elements of the Christian life: disappointment, doubt, risk, the spirit of companionship, deep faith, interpreting the scriptures together, gathering around the table, Christ's presence made known in the sacraments, and the profound wonder and joy of telling others the good news of God made known in the risen Christ. While the disciples begin the story in deep sadness – with their eyes shut to Jesus' presence with them – it ends with "their hearts burning within them." As soon as Jesus is revealed, he disappears again from their sight; yet, this time, they are not depressed, but immediately turn around and journey the seven miles back to Jerusalem to share what they have learned with the rest of the disciples. It takes a community – the women, the "other disciples," and even a stranger – to put the pieces together about what this resurrection means; how God could choose this unlikely and absurd way for love and mercy to be revealed.

Where do our stories resonate with this journey of every Christian? Perhaps we relate to the disappointment and loss of hope that Cleopas expresses. Maybe we recognize the possibility of seeing the face of Christ in each stranger we meet. We might take comfort in hearing that those closest to Jesus faced challenges in sustaining belief just as we sometimes do. Or, we may appreciate the "holy humor" of God's surprise: choosing ironic and unlikely ways of opening our eyes to the hope and joy of new life emerging around us.

We are invited, therefore, to use our imaginations and hear Emmaus as a prototype for our own faith journey. It is a good thing to invite people to stop and stay and gather around our tables. It is necessary sometimes to allow even strangers to be our hosts; to not always be so certain that we know the entire story; to let others help us to put the pieces together.⁴

If nothing else, we are reminded – as we journey our own roads – that nothing is more important than being present with others; even if, or when, they don't think they need us. For, now more than ever, folks are trying to deal with incomparable levels of confusion and grief. They are hearing conflicting reports about what is right, what is true, and what is faithful. We can accompany them in their pain and indecision. We can help to point out the confounding ironies of living in these times. We can patiently walk alongside them as Christ did for those two disciples on that most confusing of days. And, in doing so, we may help reveal that Jesus has indeed risen; and that nothing in life or in death can separate us from God's love. Amen.

⁴ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*