

The Third Sunday of Easter  
April 30, 2017  
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Acts 2:14a, 36-41  
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17  
1 Peter 1:17-23  
Luke 24:13-35

There is a long history of sacred journeys in the Christian tradition. The Bible itself sets the precedent, I suppose. The People of Israel were displaced more than once, and then called to make the long journey back home again.

The early Church was first referred to as simply “The Way” ... an homage to Jesus who once referred to himself as “the Way” AND an affirmation of the journey for those who responded to his call. “Follow me,” he said at the start, and some dropped everything to do just that and become his disciples; “Take up your cross and follow me,” he added later, which they were less willing to do.

For most of the Church’s history, people of faith have made other sacred journeys and pilgrimages. Especially to Jerusalem, of course, and other sacred sites besides. I think of some of the places I’ve traveled to ... of Skellig Michael, in Ireland, for example, or of Iona, in Scotland. And, of course, I think of that very long trek across northern Spain that Barb and I walked almost exactly three years ago, the 500-mile pilgrimage called the Camino de Santiago.

Even if we never leave home, the Church invites to take journeys. That’s the point of a labyrinth. We have one here, patterned after one laid down Chartres Cathedral, in France, in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. It’s an exercise in taking a journey, of traveling to another place without ever leaving home.

One of the ancient spiritual practices of meditative engagement with Scripture, called *lectio divina*, is fundamentally an invitation to walk ourselves into the biblical story.

And the pattern for all of Holy Week is an invitation for us to walk ourselves into the journey of Jesus’ last days. That’s especially the case when walking the Way of the Cross, as we did here on Good Friday. We placed our stations around the perimeter of the room and literally walked from station to station as we imagined ourselves to be walking the Way of the Cross with Jesus, moving step by step from his condemnation to his crucifixion and death and burial.

This morning’s gospel tells of a sacred journey. And we are particularly invited, I think, to walk ourselves into it. After all, the story tells us of two disciples walking to a place called Emmaus, but only one of them is given a name. And so, there’s been much speculation as to who this other, unnamed disciple might have been. Some think that this disciple was a woman, perhaps the wife of Cleopas. But the real point of not naming her, it seems to me, is that it invites any of us to be that other disciple, to step into her sandals and walk along that dusty way.

For us, today is the Third Sunday of Easter, but it's still Easter Day when the disciples walk to Emmaus. As Luke tells it, some women had gone to the tomb early and found it to be empty. Two angels met them there and told them that Jesus had been raised and they returned to tell the others, most of whom dismissed it as "*an idle tale.*" And it's later that same day that these two disciples decided to call it a day ... a week, a life ... and head off to a place called Emmaus.

And even though Jesus comes along and walks along with them, they fail to recognize him. That's a key point, of course. And it's a common thread in many of the Easter stories. Mary Magdalene weeps outside the tomb and Jesus comes to her, though she at first mistakes him for a gardener ... until he calls her by name. The disciples return to fishing and a man stands at the shore and tells them to cast their nets on the other side ... and they recognize him as the risen Jesus when the nets are filled to the point they can't haul them in. So, too, here the disciples don't recognize Jesus, even as he walks beside them.

And though unrecognized, Jesus walks along with these two disciples and he ventures into their conversation. In the midst of their conversation, Cleopas utters four of the most heart-breaking words of the Bible: "*But we had hoped ...*" The words speak of a future once imagined that is now closed off, never to be, of dreams and possibilities and faith and creativity all shattered. And we could, any of us, find parallels in our own lives: things we longed for, moments we looked forward to, plans we made ... that would never come true for us.

David Lose says:

... there are few things more tragic than a dead future. Once challenged to write a short-story in six words, Ernest Hemingway supposedly replied by penning on a napkin: "For Sale: Baby shoes, never used."<sup>1</sup> It's not just the tragedy of what happened that hurts, but the gaping hole of all that could have happened but won't.<sup>i</sup>

Jesus walks with them there, wading into the devastation of their dashed dreams. And he responds with words and deeds that both rebuke and console them.

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<sup>1</sup> It's comparatively trivial, but the comic strip "Adam" on April 29 offered a similar illustration:



They tell Jesus what they had been hoping for. Jesus was, they said, "*a prophet mighty in deed and word ... we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*" As they put words to the hope now dead, it occurs to me how very like it was to all the hopes his disciples had laid upon Jesus before Good Friday, but Jesus tried to disabuse them then as well. Jesus praised Peter on the day he confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, and then went on to tell them all that he would suffer and be killed because of it. And when Peter told Jesus to stop talking that way, Jesus rebuked Peter for his all-too-human hopes and dreams (Matt. 16:13-28). James and John, the sons of Zebedee, once asked for seats of honor when Jesus came into his glory, so Jesus had to explain that greatness in his kingdom had nothing to do with tyranny and everything to do with service (Mk. 10:35-45). On Palm Sunday, the crowds cheered Jesus, expressing a conventional hope for a Messiah who would liberate them, even though he rode into town on the back of a donkey and not a mighty warhorse.

On that first Easter Sunday afternoon, these disciples speak of being disappointed because Jesus was proven on Good Friday not to be the kind of Messiah he had never aspired to become. And so Jesus, though they still don't recognize him, takes them to task once more:

*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe ...*

And then he explains to them, one more time, the same lessons he had explained to them over and over before – that God works not through coercive force but vulnerability, coming to them not as a warrior but as a suffering servant.

But maybe Jesus isn't merely being peevish here. One commentator, at least, suggests that Jesus may be speaking with terms of endearment: "You sweet dummies! How could you miss it?"<sup>ii</sup>

Whatever the case, Jesus does something more than chastise them. He doesn't force himself on them. I think he'd keep on walking, if they let him. But they don't; they invite him to stay with them and he gladly accepts. And it's there, as he breaks bread with them, that their eyes are opened and they recognize who it is who has been talking with them along the way.

The language in this morning's gospel is very precise and very liturgical:

*When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*

It's precisely the language used to describe the feeding of the thousands (Luke 9:16). It's precisely the language used to describe the Last Supper, as well (Luke 22:19).

And it's precisely the same language we still use at our table week by week, when the priest takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, and then gives it to the people.

We're never really told what exactly it was that happened in that moment. I wonder if it was simply that in that moment that they remember something more vital about Jesus than all they thought was dead. Instead of lamenting Jesus as he never was, they start to remember Jesus as he always tried to show them that he truly was ... and is.

*Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him ...*

The Messiah they kept expecting had been allowed to die on the cross. The Savior they truly needed was always in their midst.

If we were to tell the story of Jesus and what we remember about him, one of things we might tell is how he broke bread with everybody: with sinners; with the multitudes; with Pharisees; with lepers; with tax collectors; with the leaders and the elders; with the righteous and the unrighteous. In fact, that is the story we do remember to tell every Sunday we gather here.

There is a long history of sacred journeys in the Christian tradition. The story of two disciples walking a dusty road to Emmaus is one of them. At our best, church is the way we walk that same road still. Jesus walks with us along the way, even if we often fail to notice. He corrects us when we look for God to shape the world according to our hopes and dreams. But Jesus comes among us whenever two or three are gathered in his name and wherever love is proclaimed.

We tell that story again and again and again ... we enter into that story again and again and again, as we gather here, in the hopes that we'll remember Jesus as he truly comes to us, that we'll recognize the one who stands among us and walks among us with good news of God's love for us all.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lose @ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3188>.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Hoch @ [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3234](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3234).