

April 23, 2023

Luke 24:13-25

Journey Together

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This last week while at the Northeast Clergy retreat a colleague and I went on an after-lunch walk. We were staying at Post Oak Lodge in Tulsa and all around the grounds were various walking trails. So, we set out on what we thought would be a leisurely walk through nature. Truth be told, we had eaten too much at lunch and were not in the mood to go sit after sitting in a workshop all morning. As we trekked, we came upon a sign that read: "Beware of Bobcats" and then in smaller font at the bottom it said – Not responsible for injury or death. I was ready to turn around. My colleague, Kevin, explained that bobcats weren't actually that big and proceeded to pick up a few rocks to throw should we encounter the bobcat. And then he kept walking...not wanting to admit my fear – I too trekked on. As far as we could go – because interestingly – soon our trail wasn't one. It just stopped. So we decided to turn back. Later we found another trail. And no bobcat warning, though how they have trained WILD bobcats to only inhabit that one trail is beyond me, Kevin put down his rocks and we ventured that direction. Until this trail too ran out. Or at least appeared to. What you need to know about my colleague Kevin is that he is outdoorsy. You might not know this about me, but I am too – I love a good patio where I can sip a margarita or my morning coffee. My point is, an unclear trail didn't seem to deter him from pressing forward so we did – right through the woods. Trail or not.

There isn't an exciting climax to this story – we made it out alive. No bobcats sighted or harmed. No poison ivy or oak contracted. Along the way we shared about life and love and church and the highs and lows of it all. There was truth telling and vulnerability. And laughter and support. And I can't help but think of the Emmaus Road when I think of last week's hike.

I love Rev. Marci Glass's retelling of the story.

Cleopas and an unnamed follower are heading out of town, thinking that they had just bet it all on the wrong proverbial horse and lost. Jesus was supposed to redeem them. He was supposed to be the man. Now he's dead and his body has gone missing, if the women's story made any sense at all.

So much for this great plan to be disciples, to follow him around Israel, healing, teaching, sharing God's love with the world. The Bible doesn't tell us

what Cleopas and the unnamed disciple did for work before they met Jesus. But perhaps they were hoping the factory still had job openings, or maybe that their fishing boat still had the “for sale” sign on it at the marina.

They certainly seem to be walking home to resume the life they had left behind.

But as they walk home, they talk about what they had seen and experienced. Which leaves me wondering about the stories they shared with each other. Did they remember the times Jesus talked about his death? Were they re-hashing all of those moments between the Passover dinner and the crucifixion?

Or were their stories the funny and startling stories you tell about those you love after they die? I think about the stories I’ve heard family members tell at funerals. Were those the stories the disciples shared as they walked?

“Remember when Jesus fed that giant crowd on the hillside?”

“Yeah, that was awesome! Remember when he healed those lepers? I thought for sure he’d end up with leprosy after he touched them.”

“Yeah, that was super gross. Remember when he pronounced judgment on the religious leaders and they got so mad I thought their heads were going to explode!”

“Good times...good times....”

Whatever they were talking about as they walked, they thought their good times were in the past. They were not walking toward the next chapter. They were walking back to the past for a re-set. The time before Jesus and before they learned about love and hope and justice and peace.

And then Jesus is with them, asking them what they were talking about. But they don’t know who he is. The risen Jesus is not easy to recognize.

And they stop. They stand still, looking sad. *“Are you the only person in the world who doesn’t know what happened this week? Did you not ever get to hear Jesus speak to the crowds? Did you not get your hopes up that things were going to be different? That the Romans were on their way out?”*

And so they tell him about this prophet they had known and loved, whom they had hoped would be the one to redeem Israel. They mention the empty tomb too. *“But women—you know the crazy stories they tell. I mean, yes, the tomb was empty, just like they said, but we didn’t see him....”* Jesus, the one they are mourning stands in their presence and listens to them vent.

And then Jesus calls them back to the hope they had as they followed him through Galilee. He lets them know that they shouldn’t be traveling in defeat, but should be living like he lived. *I think Jesus may also have said, “trust*

women. *I gave them the message*". Ahem.

Emmaus feels like a long road trip. Not in miles so much but in emotion. Somehow along the road these disciples of Jesus move from – “we had hoped” to “Jesus has risen indeed”. But to get from point A to point B seems like the longest trip ever – are we there yet? Figuratively or literally, we know this journey. In our own ways the Emmaus road is more familiar than maybe we would like to admit. Sometimes it’s the literal road that isn’t what we expect, like in mine and Kevin’s case, or like in the case of these disciples it’s life in general. In life it seems the road from dashed hopes to promises fulfilled is a long, yet familiar journey.

We take that journey when there is a cancer diagnosis. We take that journey when we learn to live without someone we love. We take the journey when we try on a new habit and hope that our motivation and energy can help us end up at the goal. We take that journey when we work for forgiveness. We take that journey when we wonder what to do next. We take that journey as we wait for answers or longings that we either don’t believe will come to fruition or that we just can’t imagine ever being possible. We take that journey when in life the trail ends and we have to find a new one. We take the journey at every situation or moment in which we find ourselves in the in between.

The main takeaway of this text is that we don’t journey alone. We journey together on the road of uncertainty and longing. We are together in our own moments of hopes dashed. In this story Jesus shows up along the road – and that is the promise. That we are never alone. That where we go, God goes with us. That whatever desolate abandoned roads we find ourselves on the Divine dwells with us even there. It is the story even the psalmists have told us about. But this week I hear it so differently. Sometimes it’s enough, to hear that Jesus is with us, but sometimes too, it’s not. And I think that’s the case for these disciples. Jesus doesn’t just show up and say, “Hey, I’m here. There, there, all is okay.” The disciples are not just having a bad day. The one in whom they had placed their trust, their hope for a kingdom of justice, their assurance for freedom from oppression, just got executed by the system from which they hoped Jesus would set them free. The one who they believed would fulfill the promises of Scripture was dead. They are grieving the death of their teacher and the unknown of what is next. They are sad and afraid and tired and I would imagine angry and frustrated.

There’s a moment in the text when Jesus asks the disciples - what things? What’s going on? And it’s a simple question – really it’s a question that makes him look fairly ridiculous because how could he not know? But the question “what things?” leads the disciples to describe the things, to name the hurt, to

share their pain. Which they have to do. To name the fear. To name the doubt. And then Jesus picks it up from there and takes it home. And in so doing even before the breaking of the bread the disciples are lighter and are remembering the call to follow in their teacher's ways.

And I think that's the model Jesus wants us to know today. Not just about showing up, but showing up and offering our road companions the opportunity to speak the truth of their pain. Or maybe we are the disciples on the road and what we need to hear is that to get from a place of hopelessness to a place of hopefulness we have to walk the road. We have to speak our truth and share our pain. We have to offer ourselves to our road companions too. For it is in the sharing that the disciples know what they must do. In the sharing the disciples are able to move beyond what has just happened. And are able to move from "we had hoped" to "the Lord is risen."

The road to Emmaus shows us that when the snares of death encompass us; when the pangs of Sheol lay hold on us; when we suffer distress and anguish, the Lord will indeed save our lives (Psalm 116:3-4), by walking the road with us, yes, but also, by asking us "what things?" and modeling how the walking of the road might actually get us somewhere. And that somewhere, eventually, is the place where we recognize and start to live out the life-changing presence Jesus.

I bet we could spend the rest of the afternoon swapping stories with one another of people who have walked the journey with us. The friends that sat with us through chemo, or helped you to take a big career risk. The ones who offered us a new way of seeing our situation. The people who caused our own hearts to stir to the idea that the sun would indeed shine again. I don't want us to take those moments lightly. For friends, those are moments of resurrection. Those are moments when someone has shown us something about God.

I also don't want us to sell ourselves short when we have been those people. Because in being ears for listening, encouragement for weary hearts, and presence for those alone on the journey, we too have lived into our own calls to follow in the ways of Jesus. The disciples don't recognize Jesus until the breaking of bread, but he was there all along. We know that part too. Lost in our grief or worry, sadness, or frustration we don't realize until later the life-giving ways our companions on the journey have saved us.

Friends, the road of life is so full of hopelessness, indifference, doubt and pain. But let us remember that the divine is all around us offering us hope, and light, and love. Asking us, "What things?" and in sharing our burdens – we are reminded of the hopefulness, the love, and the beauty of life shared

together. Let's not stop looking for the ways of Jesus around us. And let's not stop following in the ways of Jesus – sharing in life's burdens and dreams and walking along side one another.

You know at the end of the story, after they shared all of their brokenness and disappointment, the disciples were able to testify:

to the power of welcoming the stranger.

To the gift of broken bread.

And to the many reasons why we are still supposed to hope even though the world around us gives us reasons for despair. May it be so for us as well.

Amen.