

Sermon for March 10, 2019, Lent 1
Rom. 5:12-19; Luke 24:13-24
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Decatur, AL

Lord Christ, make these words the words you want your people to hear. Amen.

Keep on Walkin’

“Space . . . the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” This memorable 1960’s introduction to each Star Trek show makes an appropriate introduction to our Lenten sermon series that takes place on the road to Emmaus. No, we won’t be watching clips of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock debating each other, but we will be walking along with two disciples on their journey into the unknown, where “no man has gone before.” Or woman or child, either. We will travel with them over these next few weeks into unexplored historical and spiritual territory, on a journey that will move from blindness to enlightenment and from darkness to sight, a journey we can make our own.

Along the way, we will discover two themes: the first is that God intervenes in our dark world through Jesus Christ. The second is that Lent invites us to explore for ourselves how much we see, and what we see. So, let’s put on our walking shoes and meet our fellow travelers.

Luke tells us that we will be accompanying “two of them”: “Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus.” Two what? Presumably, Luke means two disciples because they were part of the group who had heard the amazing report that Jesus was alive from the women who had discovered the empty tomb. One, the chatty male, is named Cleopas to give his character, and the story, some credibility. This disciple was a real person with a name. The other disciple who could possibly be a woman, maybe Mrs. Cleopas, is unnamed. After this story, neither one of them is referred to again in the New Testament, so they become a type of “Everyone,” which means they could represent anyone, including each of us. The most important piece of information is that they have been followers of Jesus, yet now they are perplexed, disappointed, discouraged, and sorrowful.

Keep in mind that this “same day” is also the “third day,” and as Christians, we know what that means: it is Resurrection Day. Death and darkness have already been defeated, but the irony is that these two travelers do not realize that, not even when Christ himself appears on the road and asks them what they are talking about. Cleopas is more than ready to spill the beans: their leaders turned Jesus over to the Romans; Jesus was killed; he was buried in a tomb, proof that he had died. These two disciples thought he would be

the Messiah. And now there is talk of an empty tomb. How could their whole world have been turned upside down? No wonder the Greek word used in this text for “discussed” is better translated “reasoned”: the disciples *talked and reasoned* with each other about everything that happened.

Most of us have had seasons in our lives where we, too, have tried to reason our way through something. How many times have we walked our various roads, so consumed by grief, confusion, doubt, or despair that we couldn’t recognize anyone else? Think a moment about those times, and fill in the blanks:

You were perplexed when _____.

You were disappointed by _____.

You were discouraged because _____.

You grieve for _____.

Yes, we can empathize with the “two of them” because we’ve walked that same disconcerting path where what we hoped for, what we had expected, what we had planned simply wasn’t going to happen, or isn’t the way things will be.

The road to Emmaus could just as easily be called the Road of Life, with all its ups and downs and surprises. I had always assumed that my strong and controlling mother, the Matriarch of the Rice Family and mother of eight children, would live a long, lucid life, still giving directions and expecting our obedience until she died a peaceful death surrounded by her children. How could that not be? She was always a faithful, devout person. My mother was widowed at 58 and lived independently until she was 89. Her faith pulled her through the loss of a three-year old daughter and the loss of a 64 year old husband. She overcame a lack of financial knowledge and invested what she had been left so wisely that her children didn’t need to spend a penny of their own money on her care.

Then, at 91, receiving news of the second loss of a child, her firstborn son, her memory went into sharp decline. From that point until her death at 94, my mother lived in a residential facility, wheelchair-bound, dependent on 24 hour assistance, never able to be left alone, and existing in a confused, distorted and foreign world where almost everyone she met, no matter how long she had known them, was a stranger. Not at all what any of us, including my mother, would have expected, and I can tell you that I walked miles on the road unable to recognize that Christ was, indeed, with me. Otherwise, I could not have been the daughter that I needed to be.

I know that I am not the only one who has been caught face to face with the disappointment, confusion, and heartbreak of the unexpected. It happens to us all, and I was reminded about that this past Ash Wednesday. One of my clergy friends posted on Facebook how much emotion was involved in saying the words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” to her own three small children as she smudged them with the sign of the cross. Another clergy person added, “Or saying those words to a 34 year old mother with end stage cancer.” Yet another added, “Or marking the foreheads of a string of teenagers.” And I added, “Or one’s husband.” We need to be reminded that we are not the beginning and the end of everything. God is. Yet what we can find on this journey and in the season of shadows is that God does provide and we are granted a sense of light and hope, if we open our eyes. As the author of Ps. 84 proclaimed, “Blessed are those whose strength is in God, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.” We are all on the road, and life is nothing if it isn’t a pilgrimage toward God, who never abandons us.

Let’s go back to our travelers, whom I picture are walking slowly, their heads together, “reasoning,” trying to piece together something that makes sense, as they make their way home. As they discuss, a third party joins them. We know who this person is, but the two disciples don’t. Why? Because, as Luke tells us, they were “kept from” recognizing Jesus.

Maybe Luke used that blindness as a literary device so that Jesus would be allowed to explain the unfolding of God’s plan, as he does farther along in this story. But I think these two couldn’t recognize Jesus because they were so wrapped up in their own grief, confusion, and disappointment. Their darkness hid Christ’s light. That same blindness happens to us from time to time, not just in our grief and disappointment, but in the times we are jealous, or angry, or bitter, or unforgiving, or resentful, or anxious, or frightened, or guilt-ridden. The irony of disciples not seeing Jesus in their midst becomes our irony as well. We know the whole story, yet even we fail to see Christ.

The Good News, and there is always Good News, is, whether we see him or not, Jesus comes near us, as well, and goes with us, too.

I couldn’t have continued to visit my mother and hold her hand, time and time again, if Jesus weren’t truly there with me. I couldn’t do any of the things that I do as a pastor without trusting Jesus is beside me. That is why I know that wherever you are on your journeys, you are not alone, either. We all need to be reminded of that fact because it is so easy to lose our vision and fail to recognize the presence of Christ. We need each other so that we don’t forget, lose our sight, and lose our way.

This place we boldly go to where no one has gone before is each day of our own personal faith journey. Each day is a do-over, each day is a moment when we open the shades of grace, a new beginning full of we-know-not-what, and Luke’s story reminds us that we do not travel alone. Along the way, we find guidance in the Word, in scripture, as we do

this morning in this remarkable story. We are reminded that the Resurrection wasn't one day in history but is part and parcel of every day of our lives. As Paul writes, "So one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Romans 5:18). Jesus promises life, life in abundance. The light, John says, shines on, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5). We do not walk alone and Jesus himself is in our midst, whether or not we recognize him, as he himself promised.

That is how the story of the road to Emmaus begins. What we will learn along the way, and how that may change us as we move toward Easter Sunday, is yet to be seen. The journey continues. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Rosemary McMahan