

Easter 3A  
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April 25, 2020

*Emmaus is Everywhere*

Yesterday was a beautiful day to get out in the sunshine and fresh air. I appreciate these moments even more now as we are living in such confined spaces. Going for walks has become our new national past time. Walking through our neighborhoods, alone in the woods, with our children in strollers, and our dogs on their leashes. I see people everywhere out walking. Making sure to keep that safe six feet distance while waving at their neighbors. There's something about walking that allows you to clear your mind and calm your heart. Going on walks with my set of wheels has become essential to my spiritual practice over the past few years. The accessible trails I have explored have not only given me a greater appreciation for the natural world; but have become a soothing balm for my heart when it is wearied and frenzied. Walking is a great antidote to the burdens we carry.

And so, it makes sense that the two disciples we hear in Luke's story this morning take to the road. Much has happened in a short amount of time for these two followers of the crucified and risen Christ. They needed a good walk - time to get away and think. They set off hoping that the fresh air can give them some relief from their sadness and clarity amid their confusion. The journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus we are told is seven miles - about two hours to walk. That is how long they have to reflect on the events of the past week. The trial, the crucifixion, the tomb. The women's vision of angels. Real death and reported resurrection.

This is what they're talking about when a stranger appears and starts walking with them. In a pre-pandemic world, it would not be unusual to enter into a casual conversation with a stranger we may encounter on a weekend stroll. But there's very little small talk with this particular stranger. He quickly engages them in a serious exchange about this supposed Messiah and reminds them what scripture has to say about the events of the last few days. The Very Rev. Kate Moorehead, Dean of the Cathedral in Jacksonville, writes in her Easter meditations, "I marvel at the patience of the one who rose from the dead. It is amazing that he did not just say, 'It is me!' 'Everything will be OK!' Instead he walked with them through their pain and confusion and guided them as they found their own way back into the light again. He did not solve their pain, he helped them make sense of it. It was only after they had found their way to hope that he revealed who he was." Yes, it was in the breaking of the bread that these travelers recognize the

stranger in their midst as their teacher and friend. But it was in walking along the road to Emmaus that they begin to move from despair to hope- given new vision to be able to see Jesus as their risen Lord.

The late theologian Marcus Borg tells the story of arriving at Emmaus one evening too late to see the site commemorating this encounter with Jesus and his followers. A local told him that if they drive down the road a few miles, they will find another Emmaus! To this day, historians and archaeologists alike cannot determine its exact geographical location. It remains a mystery. "Emmaus is nowhere, because it is everywhere," Borg reflects. Emmaus is everywhere because we often encounter Christ along the road, in the unexpected places, in the breaking of bread, and not in one particular location. Jesus walked right out of the empty tomb and kept on going. He can be found on every roadway and in every household.

The very first Christians who experienced the risen One on the road called themselves the People of the Way. They came to learn that to follow him meant to always be on the move with him. That he could not be confined by our spaces, or our narrowly defined ideas and images of him and his Good News. Two thousand years after those followers took to the road, we are understanding as they first did what it means to be People of the Way. Experiencing our own feelings of disorientation, we are rediscovering that following the risen Christ has very little to do with the buildings we own, or the places in which we worship or our carefully constructed and well-worn ideas about the divine and where and among whom the divine resides.

In our email news this week I included words from one of our young people, Finn Ivory. His mother Ellen had sent me his Children's Sabbath sermon from our youth service four years ago this spring. She had come across it and realized that his words seemed fitting and as we all struggle to live in this strange new world. He said, "The people make a place – not the other way around. St. Peter's is a great place, but it would just be a place without the people. All of you make it great." His words echo a popular meme on social media right now that proclaims, "With church doors shutting across America, it's time to show the world the church has never been about the building." Finn understood at the age of ten what those followers encountered on the road and in the breaking of the bread. The Body of Christ is about sharing the journey with one another; and in doing so recognizing Jesus in our midst. Two months ago, I could have never imagined the kind of sacred encounters I've had through live streaming prayer or zoom conversations. I'll admit that my vision of the church has been pretty limited by my own experience of what we have been doing successfully for generations. But this moment in time has upended all those assumptions and reoriented my vision so that I can see and experience afresh what it means to be People of the Way.

Frederick Buechner writes, "I believe that whether we recognize Jesus or not, or believe in him or not, or even know his name, again and again he comes and walks a little way with us along whatever road we're following. And I believe that through something that happens to us, or something we see, or somebody we know - who can ever guess how or when or where? - he offers us, the way he did at Emmaus, the bread of life, offers us a new hope, a new vision of light that not even the dark world can overcome." Emmaus is everywhere friends, because Jesus continues to walk with us wherever we find ourselves, maybe especially amid a global pandemic. He walks into our isolation and our desolation, moving us from despair to hope.

The Emmaus story does not end with Jesus being recognized in the breaking of the bread. It ends with those two formerly confused and frightened followers emboldened by what they encountered on the road and in the meal, that they immediately set off on another journey to share the Good News they had received in the risen Christ. In generations to come, when the story is told about the Great Pandemic of 2020, we the church, the living, breathing Body of Christ will be remembered for our resilience and our courage in offering the risen Christ's vision of light that not even our dark world could overcome. The story will be told about us and how we kept on going, walking out of our confined spaces and away from our confined ideas with Jesus at our side as a newly emboldened People of the Way. *Amen.*