

## A Walk to Remember

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 26, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”*

*They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”*

*He asked them, “What things?”*

*They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”*

*Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*

*As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.*

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:13-35, NRSV)*

*Taking a walk* can do you a *world* of good! While I clearly need to take more of them, I certainly have discovered this in the last few years. Of course, everyone knows that regular walking is good exercise (which is one reason I need to take more of them). But it's more than just that. How many times have you taken a walk and then found that you're *thinking* better? Take a good walk and you feel refreshed and alive, and your head – filled as it may have been with clutter and confusion – is more clear and focused.

Perhaps you've experienced this, taking a walk after a heated argument – perhaps a very *long* walk(!) – but you return more ready to face your situation in as helpful a way as possible. Or perhaps you've remembered something you had forgotten ... or you've experienced the breaking of logjams of thought ... all when the legs are moving and the blood is flowing.

A while back, there was an article in the New York Times – “Want to be More Creative? Take a Walk.” It reported on a series of studies at Stanford University which cumulatively demonstrated that not only do we feel refreshed and think and remember better after a walk, but that we are actually more *creative*, more able to respond to our environment with fresh, energetic, new ideas ... more ready to *live* most fully.

In the age-old annals of walks, this walk to Emmaus described in our gospel text this morning is indeed a walk to remember! Certainly Cleopas and that other unnamed disciple would never have forgotten it, but the story of it is one which has lived on over thousands of years and still grips the imagination with its simplicity, mystery, and power.

These two early followers of Jesus – unknown to us but for this story – are on a walk from Jerusalem back to their village, to Emmaus, about seven miles away. They have come from the great city, having witnessed with horror and disillusionment in the previous few days the collapse of their dreams. The one in whom they had placed all their hopes was dead. They had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel. But now it's all over.

And so now it's time to return to the \*real\* world, to life as usual ... their weary sadness making them incapable of even processing the wild-eyed reports from some of their group. Such strange stories seem to have made them more confused than hopeful, and perhaps it's just time to accept that this meaningless death should speak to a larger, hard truth: Is this what life really comes to, when you blow away all the illusions?

It is to broken disciples such as these that a mysterious stranger then appears. And he joins them on their walk. The narrator tells us that it is *Jesus*, but that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” He asks them what they had been discussing along the way. We are told that “they stood still, looking sad” before they answered (and then with more than a little exasperation), “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” And then, as if the stranger wants to hear it all from their own lips, he asks, “What things?”

And they tell him. They tell him about the one whom they had known, about the life they had lived *with* him. They tell him of the hope that they had had. And they tell him of how those hopes had been dashed. They share even the fantastical stories of him perhaps, somehow, being alive again, but without taking any comfort from them.

We, of course, know this place. We in our own ways understand Cleopas and his friend. We *are* them. We know that cherished dreams die every day, though we do our best not to think about it. We know that what may begin as a real-life fairy tale may not have a fairy tale ending. We understand what it is to be disappointed, bitterly disappointed. And we know how hard it is, once in that place, to recover – to see over or beyond such walls to anything else ... to remember and cherish the good, the beautiful, the extraordinary ... to *live* again.

But then the stranger responds. His rebuke is sharp, and it may seem harsh, but its dose of tough love comes down to this: *You're not seeing what you need to see because you're not looking at it in the right way.* When he speaks of “all that the prophets have declared” and of the necessity of the Messiah’s sufferings, he calls them to place all that they had experienced into a larger context, a larger *story* ... into the story of Israel and of Israel’s God: a grand story of creation and fall, of slavery and freedom, of exile and return ... of heroic deeds of the strong, of the pleadings of prophets, of the songs of poets.

We aren’t told how long he speaks, but we know that with the close of the day, Cleopas and his friend make it back home to their village. For a moment, it looks as though their walking companion would keep journeying down the road, but they urge him to stay with them, and he does. And they go inside, and sit at a table, where the divine stranger – *a guest now turned host* – takes bread, and blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them.

His telling of the Great Story on their long walk had made their hearts burn with longing and hope, and now he invites them to a table of gratitude and welcome, in which that Story is enacted and fulfilled. Their walk to remember was a walk to *remember!* And now at last, in the breaking of the bread, *they finally see the one who was always already before them.* The scales fall.

There’s an old Zen saying that when the student is ready to learn, the teacher will appear. Perhaps it’s also true that when the student finally internalizes the lesson, the teacher disappears, *because the student now sees as through the teacher’s eyes.* And so, in this very moment of revelation in which they finally see him, he vanishes from their sight as mysteriously as he had appeared. Transformed in love, transformed by the Story told and enacted, they now see life as through his eyes. And so, they truly *see.* The lesson is complete.

And what a story it is that those two disciples heard on that walk ... that shapes us as we walk on our own journey. It’s a story of how the ineffable Divine Mystery was witnessed and known – incarnated in a human life. It’s a story we tell over and over – a story of one who healed the sick, reached out to outcasts, sought out the lost. It’s the story of how he took it to the end and

stretched out his arms upon a cross and suffered the depths of forsakenness in a painful and humiliating death.

And it's the story of how this death, somehow, was not the end of the story – for the women, and Peter, and all those scared and broken-hearted disciples discovered something that they would never have dared to dream. As they came together in support of one another, as they broke bread together in remembrance, they experienced the presence of their beloved friend among them still, empowering them to move forward, and to live *in* him and *for* him, with passion and courage to the end of their days.

They came to *know* in themselves that the Love they had known and in which they lived is a Love which conquers Time and Death. They discovered that their own stories – full of real joys and real sufferings – had been embraced and taken up into this Greater Story, finding their fulfillment there.

And so, here we are. Our own walk continues. Emmaus still lies ahead. But we are not alone. As we walk along, we may find that *our* hearts burn with the promise of this much greater Story in which our own stories find their true home and are endowed with meaning and purpose.

This life-long walk we make is what being a family of faith is all about. As we again and again allow the Story to shape our hearts and imaginations, as we gather around the Table of Love, as we walk on, stirred by hope, may we know refreshment and renewal, as did these disciples. May their story be ours, too. And in this renewal, may we live the lives we have been given back with gratitude and joy, seeing them as the gifts they are, beautiful and awash in mystery.

To the Glory of God. Amen.