

**“Walking Away”**

**Luke 24:13-35**

**April 23, 2017**

**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

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A warning. This might be a hard story for some to hear. But on this Sunday after Easter, I can tell you it was one of the most profound experiences of my life.

It was the summer of 2002. It had been a long night and the three women I was sitting with were devastated, but who wouldn't be? We had been together through the night as their four-and-a-half year-old daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter struggled and then lost a valiant battle to remain alive. Her brief life had been one where she was deeply loved and knew it, but she had also known terrible pain and struggle ever since she had had an extended fever as an infant that had rendered her severely disabled. She was blind, unable to speak or walk, and subject to frequent seizures.

As is often the case, these three surviving generations of women each responded to the loss of this little one in very different ways. The great-grandmother, in her late 60s, was silent, other than seeking to comfort these two others she loved so much. The late 40s grandmother kept saying over and over again a mantra that I had the feeling was a familiar one to her: “I can't be sad, I can't be angry. This is God's will.” And the early 20s mother was at first inconsolable, but as the shock wore off, she then began to hear her mother's words; they were too much for her. And I agreed with her in the silence of my heart. I asked her to step outside with me.

We talked about how some people go to that place — the God's plan place — when there is tragedy. They are unaware of how it sounds to others who are grieving. We talked about how surely God wouldn't want any mother to suffer or any child to die so young. After a while I wondered if we would go back into the room with her family but she just couldn't hear that God would want her little girl to die, even one more time, so she walked away. She said she would be back, but for now she had to walk away — not forever, but for a time.

I can't help but think that Cleopas and his companion were in a similar kind of mood on the walk that is described in today's text. The grief is just too great. The amazement is just too huge; the confusion was so massive that the four walls of the room they had all rented to stay in Jerusalem could not contain it all anymore; the whole city of Jerusalem wasn't wide enough to contain it. The pain and confusion of crushed hopes, of death and loss and now this idle tale, (what was that about angels and empty tombs?) — all these feelings just pumping through their veins until they just couldn't sit there anymore.

Have you ever been down that road? Have you ever taken that walk? Have you ever been so amazed, or so sad, or just so deeply *in it* that the intensity of it just propels you out the door? You just have to walk away from it. You have to flee the

scene because it is just too much to handle, just so you can breathe again, just so you can start to sort this out, so you can make some sense of these things?

In the tumultuous time since last fall, clergy, psychiatrists and therapists have all reported a dramatic increase of people living in the midst of deep anxiety, frustration, even depression. Every time you turn on the TV or pick up your phone it's one more bit of insanity. More and more people I know are taking breaks from the news, from Facebook, from newspapers and TF. They just have to get away from the anxiety machine of current media. I think that's what the disciples are doing on that road. And I think there are times in life when we have to take that walk away. We can't dwell in that intensity all the time.

You get asked to do one more thing for someone, something worthwhile that's within your abilities that you'd probably be good at, but something in you says "no, enough for now." And the road provides a little moment of rest. Somebody wants an answer from you, a decision, and you're just about ready to snap-to when you hear yourself saying, "Let me sleep on it." The road provides space. Then the 15th person asks you how you are doing on a perfectly awful day and you just can't get into it again so you simply say, "Fine." The road provides some distance.

Or maybe, you've been butting your head up against the system, or the prevailing culture, or even the powers that be in the church and it has all become too exhausting, too overwhelming to continue to fight when you aren't heard, or honored, or welcomed. So the road provides a retreat from the relentless rejection. The road leading out of Jerusalem is there for a reason — so that we can walk away.

And so, the disciples head out on that road, just to get some rest and space and distance. And as they walk, maybe they just start to talk a little about what's happened. Soon they're not just talking, they're discussing. In fact, in the Greek, they don't just discuss. They debate. They dispute one another. The Greek word shows up just two chapters earlier when the disciples are arguing over who is the greatest disciple of all. And here it is again. Of course! See how quickly it happened? What started as a walk to escape and to clear their heads becomes a religious debate over these things that have happened. Isn't that also one of the risks of walking away — that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we drag all the pain and strife with us on the road and can't really escape at all?

But soon enough they are not alone. The stranger joins them, the stranger that we know is the Risen Christ. And what does he do? He walks with them; he walks with them away from Jerusalem. We have to understand how profound this act is in Luke's telling of the Christ narrative. For the last ten chapters or so leading up to the Passion narrative, Luke has placed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus knows and sees that his destiny is to confront the powers that be in Jerusalem, and he seems to know what the price of that will be. But now, he walks away from Jerusalem with them. He walks in the opposite, or wrong, direction. Or, more correctly, he accompanies them as they walk in the wrong direction, seeking to help them make sense of things until, in exchanges of hospitality, their invitation to him to stay with

them, and his breaking and offering them the bread, then they see and know him. And they return to Jerusalem, returning to the place they are supposed to be, returning to the faith community and to the tough realities and questions that the church and the resurrection present.

Where are we? In the thick of it in Jerusalem? In the safe suburbs of Emmaus? On the road with those who are walking away, or running away ourselves? And what does it mean to follow Christ out of the city with those who are walking away? What does it mean to walk “in the wrong direction” with those with whom we do ministry?

Central to all of those questions is the illogical but, thanks be to God, absolute truth that today’s story reveals — on that road, that place of walking away, that place of escape, Christ is there. If we walk away, we do not walk alone. And if we are companions to those who walk away, the spirit of wisdom and truth that echoes back from the beginning of God’s journey with humanity; the love that created us; the wisdom that inspired the prophets to confront injustice and wrong; the Christ who redeems and gives life where there is death; all are there with us as we walk away and as we walk with those who do. These are the gifts and the tools of the walk away; we can draw upon them; and we can share them with our companions on the road.

How? The same way Jesus and these wearied pilgrims do. We can let all of that wisdom, and love, and strength be manifested in our hospitality and acts of community making. First THEY ask him to stay and then he breaks bread for them. All of them, even in the midst of walking away have not surrendered their compassion that gives rise to hospitality and community making.

Some would say that our friends and neighbors and ourselves who walked yesterday for the earth and for science were walking away — walking away from a culture that seems to have turned away from evidence-based knowledge. And in the signs and videos of yesterday, there were some folks who were angry and scared about what is going on in the world. But there were also communities of support and acts of hospitality here and there — a water bottle refilled; a sign held while a father changed his infant’s diaper; people of different generations and backgrounds bonding over shared snacks.

Dorothy was walking away too, running actually. No, not the one on the yellow brick road, but Dorothy Kirzenbaum. She was 11 and she was making her way down a country road outside of the little village of Otwock. Things in Otwock had gotten to be too much, too frightening, too dangerous — so frightening that her parents had told her go, to walk away, to run away. And so she did. The German officials were on their way from Warsaw to Otwock to move the people from their ghetto to relocation camps. And Dorothy, then daughter of a rabbi, ran away from the fear of capture and death. And along that road she would stop at farmhouses and ask for help. Many turned her away but many more helped. Some put her up for a day or two or a few weeks, until one of them showed her how to change her identity and kept her safe for the rest of the war. A few years ago, Dorothy

Greenstein remembered those compassionate people on the road when she participated in the Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, celebrations in California. Today is Yom HaShoah again<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps when we walk away, in frustration or fear or just because it's all too much, we can remember to bring our humanity with us. And in simple acts of hospitality and community building, all of us who walk away — all of us on the road away from the city, the places of power, or even the church — can have our own encounter with resurrection power. In a world where there is so much to do and so much we aren't getting right, we can still, in those deeply human moments of compassion and hospitality, see Christ risen from the dead. And we can get the energy and the will to go back into the fray of life, not alone, not controlled by fear, but transformed by the grace of compassion and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://jewishjournal.com/culture/lifestyle/120306/> Certain details were simplified for telling in the sermon.