

Sermon for Sunday, May 4, 2014 Luke 24:13-35 "Walk On, Traveler"

The disciples walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus were on a pilgrimage back to normalcy. The past few weeks had been horrific. They had watched their rabbi crucified. They had heard and seen that Jesus, laid in a tomb in the dead of night, was no longer there. The women had told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they were not sure they truly believed that. Perhaps they were simply grateful that they had survived, that they had not been swept up in a net of political vengeance and had been killed as Jesus had been killed. It seemed they had dodged a bullet.

True, it seemed that they had backed the wrong candidate for Messiah. True, it had ended not in glory but in ignominy. But they were still alive, and perhaps it was time to return to their old lives, before this strange and wonderful man had drawn them into his circle.

The poet TS Eliot reflects on this:

*"The condition to which some who have gone as far...
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine
Learn to avoid excessive expectation."¹*

These fellows thought perhaps they could forget the images of what had happened in the garden and on Golgotha. Perhaps they could forget their fear as they waited in the upper room, if they only just go back to regular life, to the fishing boats, to the tax collector's office, to the workshop, to their families.

So they walked and they talked, side by side. And because they were away from the others, perhaps the talk was a little more frank than it was when they all were together. Or perhaps it was because they were side by side rather than facing each other. Sort of like when we drive in the car with our teenagers and suddenly because they don't have to look at us, they say more than they would across the kitchen table. That kind of conversation.

You know what I mean. A few months ago I rode home from a conference with a colleague who is a good listener and has had her own share of ups and downs, and suddenly I was telling her stuff I hadn't shared with anyone in years, and it was okay, it wasn't scary or shaming because she listened and she understood. That kind of conversation.

So Cleopas and his pal were walking along. Another person joined them on the path. Not so uncommon. It was a heavily traveled road, and most folks went by foot. And they greeted him and entered into conversation with him. Remarkably to the two disciples, he didn't seem to know about the death of Jesus. So they talked and talked, walking side by side with him. He seemed easy to talk to that way. No face to face business, just three guys walking down the road. And perhaps they shared not only the story itself, but their own disappointment, their own sense of grief and loss, of dreams that seemed unfulfilled, how strange the words of the women that Jesus was gone from the tomb and angels said he was alive. They talked and talked, because sometimes it is easier sharing these things with a stranger than with a friend. And their new companion on the walk listened and listened, because he knew they needed to talk, perhaps talk honestly for the first time since the horror show of Good Friday.

At a training session I attended this past week, chaplains who serve the police department and the state troopers talked about how hard it is for those who have been in a critical incident – oh, the euphemisms we come up with – to share their feelings, to debrief their souls, after something awful. How those who are sworn to protect us find it difficult to unburden themselves to us, despite the programs with names like Critical Incident Stress Management and trained professionals to psychoanalyze them, as well as their own training in how important it is to have a safe place to talk about the stresses of the work.

And oftentimes the best and most life-giving of tools that these folks have to deal with what they must see and do are those who have gone through similar things. Meeting the other police officers at a local watering hole. Driving in a squad car with another officer, eyes ahead, just talking. Gathering with other military officers recently returned from deployment...who else would understand? Certainly not those who have not experienced what these people have experienced...

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), 139.

And so it was, I imagine, with our two disciples, Cleopas and another unnamed one, walking side by side on the road, debriefing each other, saying things like “well, that ends that. Time to get back to real life. It was a nice dream, but dreams always end.” And this other person came up and listened to them, really listened, and it was easy to talk to him for some reason, even though he said he knew nothing about the whole mess, and the two of them found themselves saying things they hadn’t even said to each other so far on this little seven mile hike. It was that kind of conversation.

It was easy to talk to him, so they did. They didn’t realize it at the time, but it felt natural for them to share the story with him because, in truth, he had been there. He had been at the center of it all. It was Jesus.

But they didn’t recognize him. They only knew that this was someone to whom they could speak openly, freely, without reservation. And so they did.

And after the words had slowed down from a gush to a mere trickle, he simply said, “it sounds like it went down like it had to go down.” Much like a police chaplain might say to a cop who had to draw his weapon. Much like a parent might say to a child who found herself in a situation that was over her head, and made choices that she now regretted. Much like one Marine who had seen combat would say to another Marine. It had to happen that way.

And if the story ended there, we would have a great example of pastoral listening. A ministry of presence, where we don’t try and fix things, we simply are there to lend a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen, a non-judgmental heart to absorb the pain. And that is incredible important and valuable.

But it was Jesus, so the story didn’t end there. They didn’t recognize him, and he started to go on ahead. They were coming to a village along the road, and it was meal time, and they wanted to stop and get a bite to eat. So they invited him to join them.

Simple desert hospitality – you never pass the opportunity to break bread with a stranger, and you never miss a chance to eat when a likely place to grab a meal presents itself, since they are few and far between.

And then the meal, and the bread, and suddenly, Luke tells us “their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.” The last piece of this pastoral intervention, not just listening, not just helping them come to grips with what had happened, but revealing how it truly was. He was indeed alive, and they could go on with the same dream that had filled their hearts with hope when they were part of his work prior to Good Friday. They could go on, because he was going on.

The state trooper chaplain who talked with us said that much of his work was to “love on” victims and troopers and others who were hurting, to help them find a reason to go on even if what had happened seemed to make no sense. To comfort, yes, to provide assistance and resources, yes, but most of all, to restore the tiniest shred of hope in those for whom hope had seemingly vanished.

Why did Jesus come back to Cleopas and his walking companion? Was it simply to prove a point, to show his power and glory? I think not. If that was his purpose, he wouldn’t have done all that listening. He wouldn’t have walked on that dusty hot road. He wouldn’t have stopped with them for another meal in the Galilean equivalent of “Joe’s Eats” with questionable food and a rude server.

No, his task with them is the same as his task with us. Honoring and bearing witness to the pain and confusion that our situation may bring. Hearing it – truly hearing it, not just saying “aww, it isn’t all that bad” or “it will be alright, don’t worry.” Offering some new ways of looking at it, that we may or may not be ready to accept and not worrying whether we’ve accepted them or not. But ultimately saying “I walk this road with you. The risen Christ. You do not walk alone. Hope is over the next horizon. Walk on, traveler. Walk on.”

Amen.