

Walking the Walk



Easter 3/A 26 April 2020

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Doubt and disillusion, discouragement, and despair: but I'm not talking about the current novel coronavirus outbreak, however apropos this description may be.

No. Doubt and disillusion, discouragement and despair: these are the emotions that the two travelers to Emmaus are feeling. But these are hardly uncommon feelings.

No. Doubt and disillusion, discouragement and despair: these are emotions that are common to all of us at some point in our lives. Loss of a job, loss of a loved one, divorce, catastrophic illness, even the loss of a pet, any of these things – and many more - can throw us into a tailspin and fill our hearts with anxiety and fear. We think that things will never be right again. Especially in the middle of the night, things may often seem at their very worst, robbing us of sleep. While in this state, we can easily forget that there ever was a thing called hope, and all that we have learned about God's saving grace is nowhere to be found. If ever we knew how to call upon God, it is now only a distant memory from a better and happier time; and even when we need God the most, we will often turn our backs and walk away.

That is exactly the situation in which we find Cleopas and his friend in today's Gospel. Followers of Jesus, they had believed in the new life he had promised them. Their hearts were filled with joy and anticipation as they looked forward to hearing more of his preaching and teaching, and to being witnesses again and

again to his good works, to his miracles. Fed in body, mind, and spirit by their fellowship with Jesus and with the crowds of other believers, their lives had become filled with a new joy. Even all that they had to give up and leave behind to follow him – family, friends, home, vocation. All that was as nothing compared to what they now had. All was marvelous! And they thought it would go on forever.

But that was then . . . that was before that awful Friday . . . could it truly be just two days past? Now all their hopes and dreams were as dead as their friend and leader. The events of the past few days had beaten every last shred of hope from them. They thought there was nothing left to do now but get out of Jerusalem. Leave the others behind with their grief and sorrow. Go back home. Try to pick up the pieces of their former lives. Begin again. Turn their backs on all that had once seemed so expectant and hopeful, and walk the seven miles back to Emmaus. Endure the laughter and derision and “I-told-you-so” comments of their non-believing family and neighbors, and start over.

So they started out, the two of them – Cleopas, and the other disciple – walking slowly away from Jerusalem, walking back home. Elsewhere in the Gospels, we are introduced to a woman named Mary, described as “the wife of Clopas”. This has led some scholars to wonder whether the two characters in this morning’s story might be a husband and wife. And I rather like that image – a married couple, both devoted disciples who had left their hometown to join with and follow Jesus . . .

Until . . .

Until just two days ago – that awful Friday afternoon, just outside the city walls, that terrible place of death called Golgotha. So, we find them on the road leading out of town. Cleopas and Mary. In my imagination, they are holding hands, walking slowly, talking as they go . . . going over and over and over the same sad details of the past week - as if saying it one more time would change the outcome. Don’t we all do that at times? If we’ve lost something, don’t we often find ourselves revisiting the same spot, thinking that if we go back there often enough, the lost item will miraculously appear?

As the couple walk slowly, and talk lowly, a stranger – seemingly from out of nowhere – suddenly joins them on the road. It is Jesus, but their hearts are so full of defeat and so devoid of faith that they do not recognize him.

What's more, when this stranger asks what they are talking about, they cannot believe that he doesn't know all that has happened. Where has he been? How can he not have heard? And so they tell the tale once more – beginning with the triumphant entry into the city; then the midnight betrayal and arrest in the garden; the hurried, sham trial before the religious and political authorities; the crucifixion and hasty burial. They even tell him about the empty tomb, how that very morning, some women claimed to have seen a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was not dead, but alive. But still, no one other than the two Marys had actually seen him, so perhaps the grief-stricken women had just heard what they wanted to hear, seen what they longed to see.

When Mary and Cleopas finish their recounting of the story, the stranger gently chides them: "Weren't you listening when Jesus told you how all of this must come to pass? Don't you know how, from the beginning of time, the prophets had foretold exactly what has just happened, that the Messiah must suffer before he is lifted up and enters into his eternal glory?" As the stranger walks with them and recites Scripture to them, going all the way back to the time of Moses, they are so taken in by his words that time seems to fly. When they reach the village, they don't want to let him go; they want to hear more, and so they invite him to come to their home, share a meal, and stay with them for the night – after all, the day is nearly gone, the sun is almost set.

To their happiness, the stranger accepts their invitation, and as the three of them sit down to supper, the strangest thing happens. A guest in another couple's home, Jesus assumes the role of host. He picks up the bread, he blesses it, he breaks it, and he gives it to them. And in that simple but meaningful act, something Mary and Cleopas had seen him do time and time again, their eyes are suddenly opened and they know with absolute certainty, not only who he is, not only that this is indeed Jesus, but they also know that all he had said to them was true. It was just like Mary Magdalene had said happened to her at the empty tomb. Jesus had only to speak her name, to call out to her in the same way he always did, with that same familiar voice and inflection, and she knew

immediately who he was. Like Mary Magdalene, for Mary and Cleopas, their doubt and despair are instantly forgotten, their belief restored in all its strength and fullness. Despite having walked all day, they are so renewed in faith, so excited and happy and energized, that their feet grow wings, and they run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples the Good News.

If Jesus was disappointed in the disciples and all the others who deserted him at the end, all those who, in the midst of their despair and disillusionment, chose to turn their backs and take the roads that led away from Jerusalem, to Emmaus and Galilee and elsewhere, rather than stick it out by his side, we never hear about it. One of the most wonderful things to come out of the Resurrection is that we learn this about Jesus: no matter how bad things become for us; no matter where we go to hide ourselves when the world gets to be too much for us; even if we lose our faith for a time, he will seek us out, will come alongside us and journey with us.

He won't ask us for explanations. We won't have to justify our position. There will be no recriminations. He will simply meet us as we walk, each of us along our own road - to our own Emmaus, or wherever we're headed. Whatever route we choose when we just can't take it any more, Jesus will meet us there. Even though it is us who are turning our backs and walking away, Jesus will not turn on us, will never abandon us, for Our Lord is always faithful.

In the words of the noted preacher and author, Barbara Taylor Brown: "He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the disconsolate. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles or say their prayers, who do not recognize Him even when they are walking beside Him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home, which makes this whole (Emmaus) story about the blessedness of (our) being broken."

This should not surprise us. After all, Jesus' entire ministry was focused on those who were broken, those who needed him the most: the poor, the sick, the blind - the widow, the orphan, the outcast - the last, the least, and the lost. Wherever they were, wherever he would find them, he shared not only his love, but whatever else he had, until finally he shared his broken body as well. The wonderful truth of this Gospel story is that God uses everybody and anybody to

proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, and not only when we are being good and faithful and true, but even in our moments of waywardness and faithlessness. Just as he made himself known to the two disciples walking along the road – Cleopas and Mary, walking away - and then turned them around and used them to make his story and the news of his Resurrection known to the world; so Jesus comes alongside us and walks beside us in our moments of despair, calling our name, waiting for us to recognize him, to realize again the truth of his words, to be renewed in faith so that he can use us again. In countless ways, Jesus comes among us, never demanding, but patiently waiting for us to open our eyes and see him. It may happen as we stretch forth our hands in prayer; it may happen in the reading of Scripture or in listening to a friend; it may come as we walk along a road; or, like Cleopas and his wife Mary, it may be in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the Sacrament.

Regardless of what road you are traveling, he is always there; he is always here. You have only to be willing to have your eyes opened in faith so that you can see the Risen Christ for yourself, so you can feel his presence and his peace and love as they surround and embrace you.

The gift of Emmaus awaits you. Each and every last one of you. Wherever you are, on whatever road, pray that when the Risen Lord comes to you, your eyes may be opened so you can behold him in all his glory; and then, renewed in faith, run to tell others the Good News of Our Risen Lord.

Amen. Alleluia!