

3<sup>rd</sup> Easter

April 30, 2017

## **Taking a Walk with Jesus**

This morning we are treated to the well-known and beloved Resurrection story from the gospel of Luke called the walk to Emmaus. This story that has been told and retold for 2000 years is one of the few we have of human witness to the risen Christ, and it has much in common with the others we hear in Eastertide—the love and concern of the disciples of Jesus, their distress over the recent crucifixion and disappearance of his body, and their struggle to make sense of his teachings and purpose—in this case trying to fathom the reports of those who saw angels at the empty tomb.

What makes the story so memorable is that it begins in such an ordinary way: two guys are walking down the road, talking. Considering that walking was how anyone got anywhere in those days, it would have been a normal and necessary thing to be walking down the road out of Jerusalem after an eventful Passover weekend, probably towards home. Only one of the guys is named—Cleopas—but we see them as two friends, sharing the journey, talking and discussing, processing their recent experience and grieving together. When they are overtaken by a third man who interrupts them, it says they *stood still, looking sad*. They had been so wrapped up in their conversation about recent events that they could not believe that anyone who had been in the vicinity would have missed what had happened—even without having a phone in his pocket. It would have

been like stumbling into a conversation on the evening of 9/11 with a someone who had not yet heard the news.

The stranger then listens to their tale, and listens to their distress. The most telling words they use are *we had hoped*. Cleopas and his friend were probably quite animated, finishing each other's sentences to get the whole story out—about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, upon whom they had hung all their hopes—and who wound up hanging on a cross. They *had hoped* Jesus would have been the redeemer of Israel, freeing them once again from the bondage of an oppressor—this time the Rome. What they *had hoped* had *not* included a Messiah who suffered physical torture and humiliation. What they *had hoped* was that Jesus would bring the glory of God with a mighty and outstretched arm—possibly even with a sword at the end of it.

It is easy to put ourselves on that road to Emmaus with those two guys. Even two thousand years later, how much of life is still about living in that space between what we had *hoped*, and what we have come to live with? How many times in our lives *had we hoped* to be better off, farther along, better situated, healthier, thinner, happier—by now? How familiar it is to have *hoped* that we might have made a better grade in that class, figured out how to spend more time with our family, gotten that other job that we wanted, saved a bit more money for that vacation or—God help us—retirement?

Or perhaps *we had hoped* our relationship with God would be better than it is—that we would have kept up our morning prayers even after Lent, or made more time for our community of faith, or remembered to see Jesus in that person whose way of seeing the world seems so different from our own. Perhaps *we had hoped* that by now that we would know how to invite

God into our daily lives and decisions, increasing our compassion and holding our judgments up to the light of love.

We hope a lot, and that is not always a bad thing. And yet sometimes we walk and walk along that road to Emmaus, or wherever we are going, and talk and discuss and go around and around trying to make our hopes the main thing, while Jesus is standing right there in front of us—available, accessible, and deeply attentive to us—and we are so busy hoping for those things we thought we needed, that we don't recognize him. *What things?* Jesus asks. *What things?*

When we are open to allow Jesus to walk the way with us, just as in this story, even though we are just as foolish and slow of heart as those disciples, Jesus is willing to retell our story to us, as God sees and hears it. He retold Cleopas and his friend of *their* story with God, going all the way back to the beginning with Moses and all the prophets, reminding them that it had always been promised that the Messiah would suffer and die before entering into glory. Jesus was reminding them that the ways of God are not our ways—that what we hope for is not always in sync with what God hopes for us.

What those two disciples thought of the stranger all along that walk to Emmaus is not clear, but when he started to walk away from them, something made them call out and invite him to stay and eat and rest with them. And Jesus was known to them in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes and their hearts were opened when Jesus broke the bread and gave it to them—showing them in this simple loving gesture that his body had already been broken given for them, and for all of humanity. When they knew that it was Jesus, they knew he had been the cause of their hearts burning within them, and this filled them with a new kind of hope—that if

the Lord had died and risen *indeed*, then the glory of God was beyond all they had hoped.

But what about us? We hope for so much, and yet we don't always know how to hope for the risen Lord to be with us as tangibly and as naturally as taking a walk with a stranger. Where do we find the road where Jesus is likely to show up and have a conversation with us about our salvation? How can we hope for a deeper relationship with our God—in moments that make our hearts burn within us? We walk to the communion rail and hold out our hands for the broken bread, and sometimes that is the meeting place. We walk out into the community and see the face of Jesus in a stranger, one who touches deeper wells of compassion in us than we knew we had—and sometimes that is the meeting place. And sometimes what is required is to set some time apart from the world and all its demands on us and all its attention-grabbing hopes. Sometimes we need a walk to clear our heads, to let our senses breathe, to help us risk an invitation to the Spirit.

There is a new way for this community—St. Anne's and the community around her—to practice this kind of walking. On the 26<sup>th</sup> Street side of the property, behind the Ministry Building, a new labyrinth has been constructed as a labor of love by many prayer-filled hours of many members of St. Anne's, as well as some of their friends and relatives. Reconstruction of the arbor that used to be at the entrance of the old Education Building and a pathway from it to the labyrinth are still under construction, with plans for the whole project to be completed for dedication on Pentecost Sunday, June 4. But the labyrinth is already completed and you may walk it at any time.

So what is a labyrinth, you might ask, and what does it have to do with the walk to Emmaus? A labyrinth is a symbolic reproduction of an ancient path of pilgrimage—a journey involving a walk by a pilgrim who seeks God. It can be an indoor or outdoor walking path, patterned on ancient designs as old as the Roman empire and brought to maturity during the time of the Western European Crusades in the Middle Ages as a symbolic substitute for those who could not make the journey to Jerusalem. There are intentional twists and turns, yet the labyrinth path is always clear and always leads to the center.

To use the labyrinth as a sacred space for a spiritual walk requires only the desire to walk where it leads, and the expectation of an experience of God's presence. The *way in* is a time for releasing our burdens to God—a concern, a situation or something from our past that we have needed to let go. Arrival at the center offers a space for prayer, reflection, reunion and rededication of our life to God. The time it takes to walk and to rest at the center is different for each person, each day, each situation. The way out from the center back to the beginning is a time to refocus, to regroup, to express gratitude and prepare to go back into the world with fresh eyes and an opened heart, with a greater readiness to share ourselves and the power of God in our lives with others. Walking the labyrinth at St. Anne's that has been birthed under those 25-year old oak trees—that can only be fully loved from the space underneath their shading branches—offers an outward sign of inward spiritual grace, and that gets pretty close to being sacramental. I hope the labyrinth walk, or whatever road you take to meet the Lord Jesus will be blessed, filling you with all goodness and grace and peace, for the Lord has risen indeed! AMEN

