

“Walking” (Luke 24:13-35)

There comes a sacred moment every year in the life of a Wisconsinite, after enduring the claustrophobic confinement called February and March, when the temperature soars all the way to a balmy fifty degrees and it is like Midwesterners gone wild. People shed their bulky winter coats and put on shorts, as if the heat is too much for us. It is like we've been set free. And welling up within us there is this irresistible and intuitive desire to walk around, venture outside, and remember what our neighbors look like. Over the last few weeks, I have gone on several of these spring time strolls. You notice creation after the bleakness of winter in a unique way, because just as creation is awakening around us, our very beings are awakening from hibernation. The smell of the spring helps clear away that stale, same air we've been breathing inside our homes for the last four months. You can almost hear the grass growing and the buds on trees bursting out on the branch. We know this is a sacred time that does not last forever, for soon our bodies will dart for the shade of the trees to shelter us from the heat of the summer sun.

But for right now, we savor these moments when we can step outside into the rebirth and renewal of creation. And the truth is we don't need to trudge mile upon mile to know and sense the ways earth is no longer dormant, but springing forth with new life. A jaunt to the mailbox, puttering around the yard picking up a few sticks, simply sitting on our front stoop and watching as people wander past connect us to the truth that all of creation is sputtering to life. As grass grows and greens, crocuses give way to tulips, we start to feel the momentum of creation pick up its pace and so too do our bodies. And walking outdoors becomes one of our human responses in this season. In addition to the song of birds or the desire to see how our neighbor's rose bush fared following the wet snow, beside that which is outside of us; there is also something going on inside of us in this season. With each step our whole body seems to be jarred and we shake off the slumber of winter anytime we walk outside. I don't think it is a coincidence that we call the underside of our foot a sole, for there is something that the movement and the rhythm of rolling from heel to toe awakens within us. There is a connection between the sole of our foot and the soul that stirs within each of us. Walking helps stir up thoughts. Walking helps relieve stress. How many of you have ever started out angry on a walk, your poor foot pounding into the unforgiving sidewalk, your legs caught in the middle absorbing both the frustration in your mind and the nerve impulses from your feet screaming to stop walking so hard. And as you move, you mentally rehearse what your boss said or the snappy come back your co-worker offered with a smirk that left you speechless or the brokenness of whatever situation you are carrying with you; until suddenly it is as though the ground beneath soaked up your anger. You start to feel your feet not strike so hard or your shoulders finally start to relax or your thoughts slowly let go of the frustration that had consumed you. Walking is good for us on countless different levels, but that isn't just some new fangled, health conscious sales pitch. Centuries ago St. Augustine, author of much of Catholic theology and bane of the existence of every Protestant seminarian, "wrote 'It is solved by walking'"¹.

And so, it makes sense to me that the disciple as the first Easter morning turned to afternoon set off for a stroll. Perhaps Cleopas and the other unnamed disciples first stopped by the grave site to see that the tomb was indeed empty, which it was. And having nothing new to add to the conversation taking place back where the other disciples had gathered trying to process what the last few days all meant, just kept on walking. Now, I am guessing they were extroverts, verbally processing Holy Week, Good Friday and the mystery that was the first Easter. And in Luke's first resurrection appearance, Jesus comes near and starts walking with them. Now neither Cleopas nor his unnamed companion recognized Jesus, or more to the point, we are told 'their eyes were kept from recognizing him'. Whether grief clouded their sight or they were too wrapped up in their own stuff or it is one of those details that just made for a better resurrection appearance, it does add

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Altar in the World*, pg. 61

tension to this unfolding drama. We see, we know, we are told that the stranger is Jesus. We know something the main characters do not know and it pulls us into the narrative as though we are walking alongside the disciples on that seven mile path to Emmaus, which was just slightly north and due west of Jerusalem.

Perhaps the disciples gave the risen Jesus a polite, tip of the John Deere cap head nod and kept on talking and walking, kind of ignoring his presence. But at some point though, Jesus interrupts and asks what has so captivated their conversation. And they stood still. Ever have that happen to you? Ever find yourself carrying around some kind of burden and when someone asks you a question that cuts so close to the pain you literally stop, stand still with your jaw slightly ajar, speechless trying to grasp for words that won't come? As a middle school student I learned that petty quip comeback, this is a conversation between A and B, C your way out of it; when someone would try to worm their way into a place where they were not wanted or welcomed. But the disciples don't do that. Instead they start to tell this person, this resurrected Jesus, who they don't even recognize all about...well...Jesus. Ironically, here is a moment of testimony to the One who is walking right beside them. Tension keeps building, because Cleopas and the other disciple get all the facts right, but they miss the truth that is right in front of them. Again, ever have that happen to you? Ever find yourself so sure and confident, so certain that the conclusion you've reached is based upon reason, only to have the whole theory come crashing down like a house made of cards? It is an Emmaus moment to see only dimly when we think things are so clear. It is an Emmaus moment to admit that our ways are not God's ways. It is an Emmaus moment to live with one foot in the Good Friday realities of our world and not be totally clear or totally trust enough to put our other foot, shift our weigh toward the truth and hope of Easter light.

So, the disciples kept walking, listening to Jesus tell one last time what his life was all about, who he was and will be, but their ears and minds and souls heard only through the filter of Good Friday; because that is where they were. They couldn't fully see or hear who was right in front of them. We try to walk and talk ourselves out of Good Friday moments in our life, searching for the peace that comes only with the lightness of Easter morning. But friends, much like Cleopas and his friend, we cannot always pull ourselves out of Good Friday alone. Walking and talking with others helps; encountering the grace and peace of God in creation helps; coming back to this community where we try to support and love each other in good times and bad helps. We don't have to just pick one, we need all on the journey to Emmaus.

You see when Cleopas and his friend reach their destination they invite Jesus to join them. Hospitality is crucial within the Jewish faith. Think here Abraham rushing around like a fool in the heat of the day when three visitors arrive at his tent door with word for him and Sarah they are about to become parents. Think here of the Apostle Paul's words in the book of Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unaware." That passage is one of the most poetic, poignant, and powerful pieces of advice that still penetrates our hearts today; welcome the stranger as a friend and an honored guest. So, Cleopas and his friend try to live out these instructions of hospitality that come from Jewish law. And Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it; just like at communion, just like at the feeding of the five thousand. Poof, the scales fall from their eyes and they realize it is Jesus. And poof, just like that Jesus disappears.

Ever have a fleeting encounter with the sacred? A sixth sense that something holy was stirring and you blink and the feeling is gone and no matter what you can't recapture it? Now, in those moments, and for the disciples at the table staring at broken bread, the adrenaline is rushing. Never mind hunger or how their feet ache from walking seven miles; what seemed like an 'idle tale' just a few hours ago; all of the sudden seems so true and real and so they rush back to Jerusalem and tell the others. This is one of my favorite resurrection narratives, friends, because it is so where we are today. The journey continues and we, like that unnamed disciple, are trying to make sense of what an empty tomb means. We like the disciples realize we need each other. But something is amiss

today, because we've stopped sharing and talking with each other. Even for those of us who come to church, we sit in our assigned pew, looking straight ahead, and whisper to our neighbor only about a typo in the bulletin or if their shoe is untied. Why don't we share with each other those moments of hope and brokenness we carry with us right now? Why when we rush out to coffee hour try not to talk about how Tiger Woods is going to fare today, but rather about how we need prayers for this or how we encountered grace at in a moment last week? Friends, in the journey to Emmaus it wasn't just the walking that helped, it was about the community sharing that allowed faith to be deepened. Easter faith longs for conversation. Easter faith longs for genuine connection. Easter faith cannot be worked out fully inside our own minds and hearts and souls. We need more than just the close proximity to someone else on the journey of faith; we need to find ways to share openly.

And so, it is my prayer as this spring turns to summer, we will keep challenging ourselves to talk to each other. Maybe we need to start a walking club that doesn't just talk about the weather, but through our soles touching the ground start talking about what is going on inside our souls. Maybe we can keep challenging ourselves that the true business of the church is not about this building or programs but about tending to our relationships with each other where we encounter the living presence of God. Maybe we will come tonight to hear Bryan sing and tell us about Haiti because we realize how wrapped up in our own stuff we can get and forget that we are connected to brothers and sisters we've never met. Maybe we can find ways to talk over broken and blessed bread that will surround us with grace and fill us with love. Indeed, in those moments we sense the truth of what Easter and the hope of resurrection, new life can mean today and throughout our shared life together. So, friends this spring let us continue to talk on the journey of faith. This spring let us challenge ourselves to risk, venture out to work and walk alongside our neighbors. This spring let us remain open to God's grace moving in places that surprise us and let us stay open to the sacred that comes up alongside as we travel through our week. Through all we do together let us continue to find ways to share an unconditional love and unceasing grace that is the truth of Easter. For it is this sacred truth that an Easter people cling to and stay open to and seek to share with each other as we walk in faithfully forward.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"