

ACTS 2:14a, 36-41
PSALM 116:1-4, 12-19
I PETER 1:17-23
LUKE 24:13-35
Third Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

A Short Distance on a Long and Winding Road!

As I thought about our annual biblical journey to Emmaus, a hauntingly good story filled with a mix of magical and mythical, wonderfully mystical metaphors all coming calendrically and textually on the heels of all the hoopla following an Easter Day resurrection, my consideration of these larger than life events quickly turned to the Beatles' smash hit "The Long and Winding Road," released in 1970 on their epic "Let It Be" album. As many of you have learned about me I am quite a music fan and frequently reference pop songs in my preaching. I never know why certain songs come to mind! They just do! What I found interesting during my typical Wikipedia search for all things mundane was how eerily relatable this song seemed to be to today's lection from Luke, not something that I think was on the minds of George, John, Paul, and Ringo when they composed and recorded the song. But the song hopefully makes for a decent sermon introduction! You will be the judge of that! Today we join a couple of discombobulated disciples as they made the mind-numbing journey back home to Emmaus.

It was a relatively short walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus, though the trip for Cleopas and his nameless sidekick seemed so much longer on that fateful day, every step a painful reminder of what for some, if not

many, was the worst Passover on record, a horrific weekend from hell. What a dumpster fire, a five alarm blaze! Cleanup on aisle twelve, uh eleven! The journey was about seven miles in length, a long time to talk and think, to silently and verbally contemplate and reflect, to painfully recall and consider the rapid chain of events, each sordid detail, that had just shaken to the core the foundations of Jesus' suddenly frail, fragile, and frantic disciples, all now outlaws, fugitives, on the run. Each scene, in what played out as a very public drama, was firmly etched in their minds, memories that would never be forgotten. It would have haunted them forever, except . . . We call that a teaser! As the Beatles once sang, "The long and winding road that leads to your door will never disappear; I've seen that road before; it always leads me here, lead me to your door!" And then the haunting line in the second verse, "Why leave me standing here? Let me know the way!" On this slow trek from Jerusalem to Emmaus there was no room in the minds of these two shaky disciples to even fearfully ponder the usual dangers lurking on the road, thieves, robbers, and bandits, and such! Their minds were of one accord and focused on one dreadful thing and one thing only! No doubt this reverse pilgrimage could be described as a most circuitous journey, a host of competing images accompanying these up-to-now unknown disciples, Cleopas and his unnamed companion, confused as they both surely were. They would have probably welcomed some soothing amnesia, a little brain fog to mask the misery and bring a modicum of relief to their intense agony. Imagine the overwhelming grief and dejection, the absolute feelings of hopelessness and fear threatening to consume these two depressed and despondent Jesus groupies as they circled their own wagons and retreated, begrudgingly trudging back home in defeat, wondering what would now become of their hopes and dreams, their earnest prayers, the yearnings of their broken hearts. Had they been duped, falling for a scam, the likes of a QAnon conspiracy? They felt like losers!

Yes, what would their lives be like moving forward, a whole new and vacant world filled with the unease of being on the run but hiding in place, every day now tinged with the anxiety that quickly came with being the hunted. Every day was suddenly open season on Jesus' faithful few! Wanted! Dead or alive! In one of the questions for the ages that often haunts our minds, accompanying so many regrets we amass when we are dealt one of life's insults, "what now; where do we go from here?" I can only imagine the conversation, what little there was of it. And Luke tells us that there was! What do you say? Are there any words? What images come to mind that you dare not speak? What? How? Why? We certainly know the who and when! The hushed and whispered tones, the muted mumbling musings. The questions just kept coming as did the waves of emotional trauma! It was as if they were talking to themselves while talking to each other. And no words of solace could comfort them or alleviate their hyper, heightened, toxic combination of despair and disgust. Way too early to begin to play the blame game, the what if game! The famous five stages of grief yet to begin to emerge, realities that would eventually sink deeply into their psyches as the long and winding days that now sadly awaited them passed. It was way too early for that kind of healing, that intensive emotional, mental, and spiritual work. The graphic memories of horrific torture and murder were still so green, so raw, no time for denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and much less, acceptance, and yet all of it was right there on the cusp, already seeping into their fragile subconscious, right on the edge of kicking into gear in the best and worst ways. Their minds were blank and full of more thoughts than they could process in a lifetime! **Step by step by step by excruciatingly labored step! And then the ultimate plot twist, the story turning on a dime!**

Somewhere during their travels down the dusty and well-worn road they picked up a stray, a first century version of a hitchhiker, a man wandering up to them as if out of the blue, as if out of nowhere, as if

out of thin air. Could he be a robber, a perpetrator out to do them harm. They were an easy target, but they had no money. They had spent what little they had in Jerusalem during what should have been high and holy festivities, a real celebration. After all, they were followers of Jesus. They were not carrying cash, not a denarius between them. They made the widow look wealthy with her pitiful mite! What would they do? How could they protect themselves? No way to fend off or pay off an attacker! Their only hope and prayer was to trust that the ancient custom of hospitality would kick into play, a practice that somewhat guaranteed détente between strangers. After all, they were the host and this suspect, unknown, soul was the guest. This would be but the first time this scenario came into play in this fascinating story. Now we all know that the mystery man was Jesus, the Lukan writer revealing it clearly early in the text, killing the suspense, wanting us to be fully aware of that most significant and important fact. It reminds me of the story of Abraham and the strangers who approach him and his bride at the oaks of Mamre. The reader knows they are to be interpreted as angelic beings though Abraham has not a clue, perceiving them to be men! **The plot thickens!** Jesus breaks the ice, cuts the tension by asking them a question, tongue in cheek, noticing their downtrodden and forlorn, their downcast demeanor, “What are you talking about as you walk along?” They surely thought him an idiot! What traveler from Jerusalem did not know about the hubbub that just took place in the City of Zion? “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?” Jesus knew them! They did not know him! He, for all intents and purposes, was dead, DRT, dead right there! Jesus deadpans, “What things?” And so they begin to tell the story, storytelling an immediate way of providing a modicum of therapeutic relief. Their detail is dead red, so to speak, save for one important detail!

After hearing their replay of events, each episode illustrated with flare and with dramatic passion and pain, Jesus was obviously not impressed or amused by their remembrances. After all, these two followers were leaving the scene of the crime rather than rallying and returning to it. Stop! You are going the wrong way! Jesus sternly rebukes them with the kind of strong language usually reserved, that we have seen him level at Peter and the other closest on occasion. He calls them foolish, dull minded, and then he reinterprets what Paul Harvey once famously called “the rest of the story!” He began with Moses and traced his legacy all the way through the prophets. Now on a seven mile hike, there is plenty of time for small talk and this recall is going to take some time. I will never forget the story of one of my professors in seminary, who recited from memory in Greek the entire New Testament on a late night trip from Louisville to New Orleans. I was glad I was not on that trip, not in the car. And yet these two disciples, who no doubt had heard this story infinitum, seemed unfazed and unimpressed, seemingly not able or willing to comprehend. It was as if none of Jesus’ words mattered! This shows how far down the rabbit hole of their despondency they had already sunk, probably wallowing in a good dose of self-pity!

They arrive at Emmaus and perhaps to the house of these two disciples, unless it was an inn. We are not given that information! Luke tells his reader that Jesus acts as if he is going to continue on his way to wherever, his destination elsewhere. It is part of the dance that hosts and guests do when engaging potential hospitable lodging. The two disciples do not just invite him to stay with them, but they implore him, urging him to tarry with them for the night, another caveat in the host/guest dynamic. So, Jesus accepts their generous offer, this humble invitation, and joins them for an evening meal and an expected overnight stay. The rubrics of ancient Near Eastern hospitality are clearly on display! A meal is prepared and the three sit down to partake of its simple elements. Of course bread and wine are

served! It is tradition and it makes for a great story! As if on cue, Jesus suddenly takes the mantle of host, a rather shocking development in protocol. He takes the loaf of bread, blesses it and then breaks it, and passes it among them. No words were spoken! No words were needed! Immediately, their eyes were opened to see just who it was in the room and at table with them. And just like that he was gone, vanished like a ghost, teleported to God knows where. Imagine the looks on their faces, the incredulous shock and awe, the sudden awareness of a most unanticipated, unexpected, revelation. Their only response, “Weren’t our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?” Well, their hearts should have burned! Burn baby, burn! Obviously, their memories were now stoked, sensory overload indeed! I am reminded of the old commercials for a once popular cassette tape—you all know what those are, uh were—“Is it live or is it Memorex?” It was both! Had to be a fairy tale, a fantasy, a day dream? Too good to be true! Nope! Had to be the man! Luke tells us that they got up from the table right then and there, tired as they were, and returned to Jerusalem where upon they found the eleven still hiding in fear and in place. I think it safe to say that their feet never touched the ground on that seven mile return, skipping and leaping for joy, images of the risen Lord dancing in their heads, their mental circuits now blown, totally overloaded, all the result of the simplest but most meaningful acts, devoid of words we have come to know well from the Last Supper. Yes, the mere breaking of bread. Oh my, what a story!

There are so many rich images emanating from the Emmaus story that we could listen to them for the rest of the day. We will not! The takeaway among many that I wish to convey in this hour is the reminder of the import inherent in these sacred acts we enact every time we meet. In word and song, and of course, when we share the Sacrament as we break bread and dip wine, it is our hope that in this sacred setting and these sacred moments that we will experience

transcendence, the awe and wonder that is commiserate with what we believe to be the presence of God, Holy Other, Ground of All Being, Great Spirit of the Universe. This is why we do what we do when we do what we do every time we do! Every moment, every movement, provides an opportunity to experience holy presence, to at least momentarily, temporarily, step outside of ourselves and escape to that which we can only describe as eternal. It is most rare indeed! This wonderful Emmaus story is also a reminder of what happens when we leave the confines of fear and anxiety and are vulnerable to the degree that we are radically welcoming and hospitably inclusive of anyone that might ever be narrowly and naively considered other, stranger, different. Just this week four citizens were shot, one killed, because they accidentally invaded the space of another, a ring on a doorbell, two drives up a driveway, one lost, the other delivering groceries to the wrong house, a ball bouncing in a neighbor's yard, accidentally getting in a different vehicle in a parking lot. Are you kidding? You have got to be kidding? No, we are not! You cannot make up this stuff! To use an image from an old Hall and Oats song, these were the worst, the most horrific, manifestations of a "missed opportunity!" Instead of grace, a little mercy, some playful correction perhaps, the chance at a brief encounter of a delightfully relational kind, an opportunity to meet a new neighbor, to practice a random act of kindness, these unsuspecting victims were met with gunfire. Welcome to America 2023! Think about it! Just imagine! Is that who we have become? The answer for a bunch of folks today is unfortunately "YES!" Sadly, this is our new normal, our sobering routine reality! In today's lection from Luke, Jesus could have been met with a very different and unfortunate fate, again, when he approached Cleopas and his companion, the two of them already on edge and surely distrusting of anyone who dared approach them under these most trying of circumstances. Of course, we already know from the narrative that they were authentic, genuine, followers of Jesus and so we can safely

assume, knowing full well the outcome, that their response would be lovingly positive and graciously proactive to this stranger, not vitriolically or violently reactive. This is how we relate to fellow sojourners and that is exactly who and what all of us are, some, if not all the time. We are all aliens, foreigners, strangers, travelers in some way as we journey through this interim and pilgrim land toward home, the eternal Emmaus that awaits us all!

The gospel calls us to a better world, to build a better world, a world that is hospitable, yes, I use that worn out word a lot! We are called to love God and neighbor and self and we only do that when we allow ourselves the vulnerability of engaging fully those, anyone, we encounter in all the serendipitous ways we meet one another on life's varied travels from Jerusalem to Emmaus, whatever that road is for us. And as followers of Jesus, none of our roads are ever designed or determined to be dead end streets! As committed Christians, fulfilling exactly what that term is intended to mean, all our roads, our lives, are wide open spaces, connecting us with everyone God loves and that means everyone, "no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey!" After all, everyone is traveling on a journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, no matter the literal destination we are all taking! Our job is to help everyone get there! Are we there yet? NO! We pave the potholes and fill the ruts, making the pathways smooth and straight even as Isaiah's prophecy declared and John the Baptist quoted, reiterated and reinforced. This is who we are called to be and do as individual believers by faith and what we are called to be and do as the body of Christ, the locally gathered missional congregation. And echoing the words of Acts in another week, we do so day by day, yes, minute by minute, hour by hour, until our journey is done and we have made it home by way of the many Emmaus destinations that beckon, places where the bread is always and forever blessed and broken in God's eternal blissful realm.

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and meets us on the road of life each and every day, with every breath we take!
Amen and amen.**