

“The Road to A Mess” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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Luke 24:13-25 The Walk to Emmaus Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

THE TWO DISCIPLES were going home, walking away from Jerusalem three days after crucifixion. Oh they had heard the rumors of Jesus sightings, a murmur of some crazy women who said the tomb was empty, but nothing concrete, nothing that could penetrate their despair. They were buried in the facts; that is, they could list the events in chronological order: Jesus was a prophet. Jesus was powerful. Jesus allowed the peasantry to dream and believe and provoked the elite into new ways of thinking. But Jesus could not avoid the political show-down and the reigning powers prevailed anyway. It was all over and done with. End of story. Nothing new to learn, nothing new to tell.

They were going home, trying to escape from the grief that surrounded them in Jerusalem. They were running away, nursing their anger, seething in the betrayal, harboring the resentments. They were headed for anywhere else, as long as it wasn't the place that reminds them of Jesus.

Jesus encountered his disciples on the road, but they going the wrong direction. They were not on the wrong road, they were simply going in the wrong direction.

What does that mean for you? When do you find yourself going in the wrong direction? When you face a difficult situation, something that you neither understand nor like, do you ever withdraw by "running away"? Perhaps you take a long circuitous drive in the car; or spend dollars on a shopping spree. Some folks drink themselves into a stupor, others eat huge quantities of junk food. Perhaps you are one who zones out into the

world of TV or computers. I myself do some of all of that. I dig in and close off and isolate. I begin to sink into my entitlement to resentment. I take everything personally.

Some years ago a friend and I quipped, "I know why the two on the road didn't recognize Jesus -- They were past 50 and the guy just looked fuzzy!" Lately however I think that maybe they were past 60 and they recognized his face all right, but couldn't remember his name!

I think the disciples didn't recognize Jesus because they weren't looking for him. It's pretty hard to recognize Jesus when you think you already know all the answers and feel sorry for yourself to boot. It can be comforting in its familiarity.

To be sure, the road to Emmaus was not the road to Damascus. There was no blinding light or earthquake to draw attention to Jesus' presence. Instead Jesus just walked up along side of them. He met them where they were, right in the middle of their grief and despair. He didn't criticize them or try to pep rally or scold them. He simply drew along side. And he stayed with them until they invited him in.

If it weren't for their invitation, the stranger would have continued on his way and remained unrecognized. It is noteworthy that He does not invite them. They invite him, they almost demand that he stay with them.

Sometimes Jesus takes the form of a stranger or a child or a duo singing children's songs. Sometimes Jesus is a friend with wisdom, sometimes the homeless woman you stop and talk to. Sometimes Jesus is just a presence, a burning in your heart, a feeling of purpose and clarity. This story says, look for this, and pay attention. You won't always understand, but you ought always to be aware, be looking for that Jesus presence and power. During his life on earth Jesus invited us to join him, over and over and over. He reached out and called and taught and healed and loved. But now, in resurrection, Jesus waits for us to invite him. In resurrection, we are the ones with the initiative.

Why should we do this, keep looking for Jesus? Because we are all on the road to Emmaus. That unnamed companion bears each of your names, he or she is us. And the road to Emmaus is, frankly, always a road to "a mess." Life is messy. It is a constant battle to deal with circumstances that don't work out, illness that pounce unannounced, loss of money or friends or power or loved ones, stubborn other people who just will not cooperate! Circumstances swirl out of our control. Wars wage, politicians sputter, while stocks fall and prices rise. Our emotions range from elation one day to despair the next. And in our fear, in our frantic panic to understand and control, we have limited vision. We begin to live into our own expectations, our own dire forecasts.

The word from the Gospel this week is that Jesus lives! And Jesus will show himself to us in our everyday lives, our ordinary journeys, if we but hold our selves open. Recognition is easier when you are open to new understandings, when you are looking for Jesus instead of grieving his absence.

There once was a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. He knew it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch -- four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer. He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park. On one of the park benches sat an old woman looking at the pigeons. The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other. Once again she smiled that beautiful smile.

For a long time the two sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally the little boy realized that it was getting late and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before.

When he arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. "What did you do today?" she asked. "Oh, I had lunch in the park with God," he said. Before his mother could reply he added, "You know, she has the most beautiful smile in the world." Meanwhile, the woman left the park and returned home. Her son noticed something different about her. "What did you do today, Mom?" he asked. "Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God." And before her son could say anything at all, she added, "You know, God is a lot younger than I had imagined."

J.R.R. Tolkien would summarize this sermon with some of the hobbit songs from "The Lord of the Rings" Trilogy. Early in the first book the hobbits sing:

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone
And I must follow if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet
And whither then? I cannot say.

In the middle of the Trilogy one of the hobbits lies captured and chained in a goblins' dungeon in the evil land of Mordor. Although it seems all is lost, he sings:

Though here at journey's end I lie
in darkness buried deep.
beyond the towers strong and high
beyond all mountains steep,
above all shadows rides the Sun
and Stars forever dwell;
I will not say the Day is done,
nor bid the Stars farewell.

It sounds like a Good Friday song to me. Finally at the very end of the Trilogy, when the journey is over, the quest has been accomplished, the foes all conquered, one of the hobbits is old and tired and he sings this song:

Still round the corner there may wait
 A new road or a secret gate;
And though I oft have passed them by,
 A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
 West of the Moon, East of the Sun.

The road to Emmaus goes two ways. You can try to run away, to deny your call and your yearnings, to shut the door and take the easy road of denial and despair. Or you can look for the risen Christ in your life all around you, and let him lift you up on angels wings and fly directly into the heart of life, determined to transform it and yourselves into the kin-dom of God.

Alleluia!

Praise God for Easter joy and for the joy of recognition! AMEN!