

Psalm 43:1-5
March 6, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Luke 24:13-35, focused on verses 13-17
First Sunday of Lent

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Shortly after he signed the contract to star in the movie *Honeysuckle Rose*, Willie Nelson was asked by the film's executive producer to write the movie's theme song. Nelson said when he was asked if he had any ideas for a song, he replied, "I don't know, what do you want the song to say?" The producer said, "Can it be something about being on the road?" Willie Nelson said, "It just started to click in my head. I said, 'You mean like, 'On the road again, I can't wait to get on the road again'?" They said, "That's great. What's the melody?" I said, "I don't know yet." Obviously, Willie Nelson found a melody that worked, since he won a Grammy for Best Country Song and it was a #1 hit.¹

Willie sings, "On the road again, Just can't wait to get on the road again. The life I love is making music with my friends And I can't wait to get on the road again. On the road again, goin' places that I've never been, seein' things I may never see again, on the road again. Like a band of gypsies we go down the highway, we're the best of friends, insisting that the world keep turning our way, and our way is on the road again."

Well, here we are on the road again in Lent 2022 – on the road to Jerusalem, on the road to Holy Week, on the road to Good Friday, on the road to the cross, on the road again to the resurrection. The road, the journey, the path, the walk – all of these metaphors are often used to describe the season of Lent. Our Lenten journey to Jerusalem on the road again is not a hurried trip. We're encouraged to take our time, to think about Jesus and all the things that happened to him on his own journey on the road to Jerusalem. Our choir sang about it in a beautiful choral call to worship last Sunday "Song of the Man on the Road" – "I met a man on the road to Jerusalem, His face set straight ahead Eyes deep burning with a strange hot light And I wondered with what passion it was fed."

It might seem strange, then, that while we are on the road to Jerusalem and the cross during this Lenten season, we will hear the story of another journey on a road, the road to Emmaus. At first, this road leads ***away from*** Jerusalem on the first Easter Sunday afternoon, as Cleopas and his companion were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. But I think we'll discover that this Emmaus Road story has a lot to teach us as we make our Lenten journey on the road to Jerusalem.

Last November, Nancy and I attended a Continuing Education event at Union Seminary in Richmond. We had three books for required reading prior to the event. I quickly read through the first two books. However, I struggled with the third book, *Life*

Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community by Ruth Haley Barton. In fact, I hadn't even finished reading it when we got to Richmond. Wouldn't you know it? That was the one book the event leaders focused on and used to structure the entire week! I quickly came to appreciate what Barton writes in her book that is based on the Emmaus Road story. At some point during the week, I suddenly thought, "This would make a good Lenten study!" And so, several folks in the congregation are joining me in that journey during these next seven weeks.

Barton's book – well, actually, the message of the Emmaus Road story – is what inspired these Lenten sermons. I've never preached on the same gospel story for several weeks in a row. My plan is for us to hear the entire Emmaus Road story in a different way each week, then focus on a few verses in the story. I encourage you to take the time to read the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24 each week before you worship. It's a good story and I think you'll find yourself right there on the road again with Cleopas and his companion.

Back to "On the Road Again," with apologies to Willie Nelson. Suppose we were to rewrite some of the lyrics for Cleopas and his companion to sing as they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They might sound something like this: "On the road again, we've gone places we've never been, seen things that we many never see again, but here we are on the road again. We were like a band of gypsies goin' down the highway, we were the best of friends, insisting that the world keep turning our way, but that way is no more, and we're on the road again . . . on the road again, but to where?"

Think about your own journey in life, the ups and downs, the twists and turns, the highs and lows, the smooth places and the potholes. And then there are the unexpected sinkholes. Think about how you feel when your whole world has been turned upside down and inside out. Think about the woulda's and coulda's and shoulda's and all of the "what ifs?" Think about the regrets, the crushed dreams, and the longing for the way things used to be, even as you face a future that is scary and unknown. Think about how you rehearse – again and again and again – all the details of what happened. Now you know how Cleopas and his companion were feeling on the road again on Easter afternoon. Now you have a clue to what Luke means when he tells us that Cleopas and his companion were "talking with each other about all these things that had happened." (Luke 24:14) As Ruth Haley Barton says, "They weren't talking about the football game or their golf game. They were talking about everything that had happened over the worst weekend of their lives. Not 95%, not 98%, but **'all** these things that had happened."

That's when Jesus showed up – while Cleopas and his companion were rehashing **everything** – past, present, and future. Look again at the picture Bill used for this morning's worship slide. It's a good interpretation of Luke 24:15-16: "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."



Ruth Haley Barton says, “Jesus plays dumb and asks, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’” Jesus is providing some good pastoral care. He meets Cleopas and his companion right where they are – on the road again – and he asks an open-ended question that lets them tell their own story. But before the two disciples say the first word, their story – a story of dashed hopes and crushed dreams and bitter sorrow and doubts and questions – is written all over their faces. Luke tells us, “They stood still, looking sad.”

Here’s how some other translations describe that poignant scene:

- (The Complete Jewish Bible) “They stopped short, their faces downcast.”
- (J.B. Phillips New Testament) “They stopped, their faces drawn with misery.”
- (Good News Translation) “They stood still, with sad faces.”

Perhaps the best interpretation of all is Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* which says, “They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend.” Which, of course, they had – “We were like a band of gypsies goin’ down the highway, we were the best of friends, insisting that the world keep turning our way, but that way is no more, and we’re on the road again.”

How often are we like those two disciples slowly making their way back to Emmaus, immersed in their sorrow and fears and uncertainties? How often do we not recognize Jesus who walks along with us each step of the way? How often are our eyes closed to the very real presence of the Lord by our side when we most need him? Our Lenten journey is a time when we can look for Jesus’ presence among us and offer this prayer: “Living Lord, by the power of your Spirit, you are present among us. Yet, like the first disciples, we fail to see you in our midst. We do not realize you are walking beside us. We do not notice you in everyday encounters, for we are consumed by our own concerns. We do not recognize you on our streets or at our tables, for our expectations are too limited to imagine all the ways you dwell among us. Open our eyes to perceive you in our midst, so that—seeing you clearly— we might follow you faithfully. Amen.”

During the week of March 21-25, Nancy and I will be at the Cedar Cross Retreat Center outside of Louisburg, North Carolina. One of the sites I most enjoy at Cedar Cross is The Way of Jesus. There are some photos on the screen to help you visualize the place.



Several years ago, when Nancy and I were at Cedar Cross, I walked the way of Jesus, which consists of fourteen stations for guided meditation through various stages of Jesus's life. I had no particular timetable for walking The Way of Jesus. I didn't intend to rush through but, then again, I didn't really mean to spend much time at any one station. When I reached the third station, I found the little bench and sat quietly for a couple of minutes. I thought I was there in the woods alone walking The Way of Jesus by myself. When I started to get up and head to the fourth station, I felt a hand on my shoulder, gently pushing me to sit down again. Notice I didn't say I **saw** a hand on my shoulder, but as sure as I am standing here today, I **felt** a hand on my shoulder. I didn't hear anybody speak, but the message was clear – "Stay here for a while longer." So, I did, and when I got up again, I walked to the fourth station, and then finished The Way of Jesus. That experience has stayed with me to this day. To be honest, I guess I didn't expect to meet Jesus there that day (don't ask me why!), but I think the Lord had other plans. He knew I needed that extra time sitting on that bench.

On this journey we call life, anything and everything can keep our eyes from recognizing Jesus walking with us. Sometimes it may simply be a matter of not really expecting to encounter Jesus on the way. Other times it may be that life's anxieties, crushed hopes and dreams, and uncertainties and fears about the future cloud our vision and we don't see Jesus walking along with us. Maybe sometimes, when we're on the road again, we're insisting that the world turn our way, when we really need to yield to God's will and God's way.

As we make our way to Jerusalem on this year's Lenten journey, we can walk with Cleopas and his companion, because we share with them all of the challenges of life. Let us hope that as we are on the road again, we will recognize Jesus walking along with us, that our eyes will be opened, and that our hearts will burn within us.

Here's a prayer from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who died much too young at the age of 53 in December 1968. As you hear this prayer, imagine how it might

have been on the lips of Cleopas and his companion on that road to Emmaus . . . and imagine how it can be on your lips and in your heart on this Lenten journey and on the journey of faith. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you are ever with me, and you will never leave me face my perils alone. Amen.”²

Let us pray: Risen Christ, on the road to Emmaus you were the disciples’ companion. As you journeyed with the two who travelled the Emmaus Road, travel with us on our journey of faith, along life’s pathways, and at every encounter. Amen.

NOTES

¹Courtney Fox, “On the Road Again’: The Story Behind Willie Nelson’s Oscar-Nominated Song,” April 19, 2021 at www.wideopencountry.com.

²Thomas Merton, “The Merton Prayer,” from *Thoughts in Solitude*, The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1956, 1958.