

“Walking with Jesus”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 24: 13-35

Walking. It's an activity we tend to do without much thought as human beings. We get up and walk from the bedroom to the bathroom. We walk out of the house to our car or to the bus stop. We walk from the parking lot to our office, to school, to the grocery store, to the doctor's office. We may say that we're going to “run some errands,” but I rarely see anyone actually running to do their errands. We often prefer to walk to get from one place to another. It's an activity that we tend to do without much thought as human beings.

That is, unless you are physically unable to walk. Sometimes we suffer an injury that prevents us from being as mobile as we normally are, and we begin to realize how much we had taken the simple act of walking for granted. Sometimes we experience a disease or illness that gradually or permanently takes away our ability to walk, and we recognize how much the world around us is structured for the able-bodied. Sometimes we are born with the inability to walk, and we realize how quickly people are willing to judge our “deficiency” despite our capabilities to function in ways different than theirs.

The act of walking sometimes embodies a deeper meaning than just getting from one place to another. In the fall, Lisa will be making a pilgrimage walk, the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and in doing so she will be traveling a spiritual road that millions have traversed before her. If we have visited and walked along paths of great historical significance, there is a greater sense of awe and appreciation for that moment, knowing all that transpired in that place. I felt that way when our family visited Washington, D.C., in March. As we walked all around the National Mall, I thought of events like President Kennedy's funeral, Dr. Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” Speech and Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. When you walk in the footsteps of history, you feel a deeper bond with the human family to which we all belong.

“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” (Luke 24:13-14).

The walk these two men were taking was a pilgrimage, although at the time they did not realize it. They were walking in a fog of emotional uncertainty and spiritual shock. The man whom they had believed in, in whom they had placed their trust, that man had been killed – crucified – by their chief priests and leaders. The trauma of that

day was unbearable, for, as they said, “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (24:21). Then, to add to that emotional roller-coaster, some of the women who had gone in the morning to care for their master’s body, discovered his tomb was empty. “Visions of angels told them he was alive, and we went ourselves and found it just as the women had said” (24:23-24). What were they supposed to think or believe? How were they supposed to live the next day based on all that had transpired? Their hearts and minds were so distracted, they had no idea who was walking alongside them.

Has that ever happened to you? Maybe you’ve been through an incredibly emotionally-draining experience, and as you are constantly thinking about it you are simply on “auto-pilot,” not really remembering how you got from point A to point B. There are a number of occasions where I can recall being so mentally consumed by something as I was driving somewhere that later I stopped and wondered, “Did I obey all the traffic laws?” It’s not difficult to walk, drive, run, or move through life, utterly consumed by our stresses, our anxieties, our worries, that we cannot see clearly where we are, what we are doing, or who might be walking beside us.

The power of the Walk to Emmaus is that despite our distracted nature and inability to see clearly, God does not walk away. As we travel down the road after Easter morning, there are still significant doubts and uncertainties – we’re still looking for the risen Lord in a place he said he would no longer be. As we said two weeks ago, Jesus has gone on ahead – and we encounter him in our walks of life, even when at first we don’t realize it is actually him. He listens to us, teaches us, and encourages us, all with love and patience and compassion. The walk to Emmaus is more than a case of mistaken identity. It is a deeply meaningful reminder that our God has not and will never forsake us, no matter how blind we may become to his presence directly in our midst.

Anytime I read this passage, I immediately think of the “Footprints in the Sand” story. It’s become such a well-known piece of Christian inspirational writing that it might have lost its meaning through overuse. I remember that the first time I heard that story I was in high school. It was incredibly meaningful to me, because I was suffering with very low self-esteem. I was plagued with severe acne as a teenager, and there were definitely times that I wondered whether my God had forsaken me. There was not a second set of footprints beside mine in the sand as I looked like and felt like an outcast among my beautiful peers. I would look in the mirror and wonder how anyone could see anything handsome or appealing in what I saw.

Then, to consider during those very difficult times, that the Lord replied, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.” It was like an Emmaus road experience for me. I had been unable to see beyond my self-imposed judgment, and I

realized that my God loves me – now and forever – for the individual God created me to be. And my Lord will always walk alongside me, even when I can't realize it is him.

When we come to this table, we all have our own perceptions of what's happening in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. For me, I have always taken to heart the fact that when we are invited to this table, we recognize that the risen Lord is present with us. When we break the bread and pour the cup, and share this meal in the same way Jesus shared it with Cleopas and his friend, our eyes are opened and we recognize him. The sacraments are our visible reminders that our risen Lord has not left us. He is right here, walking beside us, and he will never leave us, no matter what we might face.

You may be walking a road of uncertainty and anxiety, unsure of which direction to take, or how to even ask for assistance along your murky path. Despite your fears, know that your Lord is walking with you.

You may be walking a road of exhaustion, unable to focus on what brings you joy, instead just wanting to get through the next thing. Despite your weariness, know that your Lord is walking with you.

You may be walking a road of ease, sensing that life is good and you have everything under control. Despite your confidence, know that your Lord is walking with you.

You may be walking a road of grief, saddened by emptiness, yearning for wholeness, uncertain as to how to live into a new way of life. Despite your mourning and loss, know that your Lord is walking with you.

Whatever Emmaus roads we may be walking, we are never walking them by ourselves. That is the promise of Easter hope. When we recognize our Lord walking with us – in a family member's embrace, in a friend's listening ear, in an act of kindness by a stranger, in the sharing of bread and wine – when we recognize Jesus walking with us, then our hearts will burn inside us, as they did for Cleopas and his friend, and we are moved to tell others, "He is risen indeed!" Thanks be to God. Amen.