
Walking Each Other Home

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Easter 3 – Year A**

Well, good morning everyone. Grace to you and peace and in the name of the God of creation who loves us all. Amen.

It's a beautiful spring morning here in our backyard sanctuary in this time of quarantine. We've been spending a lot of time back here. And I've just come in from a walk with Sadie, the wonder dog, whom you may see exploring her domain as we talk.

I've been thinking about our time together this morning and for some reason I thought it would be a good idea to get out early and go for a walk and to use my imagination to think about the possibility that I was the unnamed disciple with Cleopas on the Emmaus road. And it occurred to me that so are we all. The fact that we don't know who the other disciple was in a way kind of invites us into the story. We don't know why they were going to Emmaus. In Mark's gospel, Emmaus isn't mentioned at all. It may be that Cleopas or the other disciple lived there. And in a way, I like to imagine that as well, that in the midst of all the dislocation and disorientation they were experiencing, they were walking each other home as we try to do for one another and as after all is the truth at the heart of all of our stories, certainly the Christian story.

The other thought I had this morning when Sadie and I were walking is that it occurred to me, in a new way, how significant it is that Jesus appeared to them and simply listened to their lamentation. We know that the songs of lament, such as the one that we heard our amazing choir chant this morning, are there in part to remind us that lamentation has its place and that God listens to our lamentations, even when we may not know or feel that God is present. He is. So it's powerful to me that Jesus didn't need to identify who he was. He joined them and walked along with them. As we sing in that lovely hymn during advent, he joins in all our sadness and he feels with all our gladness.

Ed Friedman, a rabbi and family therapist, one of my mentors, has reminded us that sadness, grief, and loss that aren't transformed get transmitted. And I think that's right. I think we have to do the good, hard grief work, especially during times like this when we may be experiencing a number of different kinds of losses. And it's important to remember that there are different types of grief. There's the grief that we feel right now in this moment in relation to whatever is going on in our immediate concerns, and there's also what we call anticipatory grief. It's the grief of the unknown. It's the grief that we feel when we feel dislocated and disoriented and we're just not sure what's going to happen next. And I think both of those are true for all of us right now. And we have to remember that these aren't linear, they don't necessarily happen sequentially. Our grief, like life, is messy and it's hard. And we need one another to walk along with us on the road.

One of my favorite authors over the years is a physician named Rachel Naomi Remen. Maybe some of you remember her wonderful book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She reminds me, and all of us, that our stories really are at the heart of what it means to be human. They give us vehicles or context or narratives in relation to which we can move from grief to compassion. As my remarkably gifted colleagues have said during lent and now in this Easter tide season, our wounds are places of vulnerability. The places where we are sad and broken are transformed when we encounter Christ on the road. We need companions, we need conversation partners, we need people to hear our stories because sometimes we can get stuck in our own histories and we need help finding a new way.

Cleopas and his companion were so very sad, we hear in today's gospel text, and the reason resurrected

Christ appears to them and listens ... Every summer, I gather in Northern Colorado with dear friends from graduate school days. We've been getting together for almost 30 years now. And one of my friends, Bob and I, are trail runners, hikers, and we enjoy getting up in the high country at least one day for an adventure. And last year, we decided that we would try to climb to Comanche peak and sign the summit register there. It's at about 13,000 feet. We're both meticulous planners, we are assiduous in our preparation for the journey, but one thing we didn't plan on last year was the fact that in the previous winter, Northern Colorado had experienced 400% of its normal snowfall, and even that day in late July, there were drifts of 20 and 30 feet. And this meant, among other things, that we had to go off the trail and navigate cross country around these snow banks.

On two or three occasions I worried that we simply were going to have to turn around and go back home to the cabin in the Valley. And each time, at the last minute, we saw what in Northern Colorado are called Cairns, C-A-I-R-N-S, these are guidepost or a signpost, if you will. In fact, if you look just over my left shoulder, you'll see one that we have in our backyard. Often, these are stacks of stones that are very helpful when you're above the tree line or in uncertain terrain as if to say, it's okay, you're on the right path, everything will be all right. In some cultures such as the Inuit and the Arctic, these are anthropomorphize so that they take on almost human form. They're called inuksuks.

I think in some ways, dear ones, Jesus was just such a guidepost for Cleopas and his companion and that evening for the disciples in their sadness and in their pain. My father in law, or retired physician, has long collected lighthouses, and I suspect the reason for this is that it's a symbol of the resurrected Christ in his faith journey that sometimes when we feel lost and alone, we need a beacon light in the darkness, if you will. Jesus said, "My peace I give to you. Love one another". And he embodied, he incarnated, if you will, that on the road to Emmaus with Cleopas and his companion. And so he does with all of us. We're called too to be the body of Christ in the world, to bear witness to lamentation, to hear the stories of those whom we encounter on the road. And as walking companions, try to be a vehicle, a guidepost, the kind of sign on the road that allows together, all of us, to turn our lamentation into compassion, which is the Cardinal virtue of our tradition.

Well, some of you may remember a colleague of ours at the cathedral a number of years ago named Bill Peyton. The Dean hired Bill as a part time priest associate, the same role that I have served in as one among your clergy for almost 20 years now. Bill and I became close in ways that I think was surprising to us both. We came to the priesthood in different ways, Bill spent 40 years serving various congregations in a faithful and steadfast way and I have spent most of my career as a seminary professor and as a pastoral counselor. And so my time in parish ministry is just one thread in a complicated vocational tapestry. Bill and Joan became friends to me and Nikki. We shared a love of baseball and jazz. And after a time at the cathedral, Bill was diagnosed with leukemia and after several rounds of treatment, made the courageous decision to live life as fully as he could in the remaining time he had.

One afternoon, shortly before Bill died, we were sitting out on his back porch on a day, not unlike this one, a beautiful day in the spring, and we were watching the chickadees and nut hatches at the bird feeder, just talking, being quiet. At one point Bill said, "I've had so much love", and I said, "You're absolutely right. There are so many of us who love you and we're going to miss you." And Bill looked at me and he said, "No, that's not what I mean. What I mean is that I've had so much love to give away." He said, "If there's anything at the heart of the truth of the resurrection of our walk on the journey with Christ, it's that we are called to give our love away." Our woundedness, our fears, our vulnerabilities are the source, paradoxically, perhaps of our wholeness of our integrity as Christians. Those stories are precisely the places where we connect with each other and we help one another transform our grief and our sadness into compassion and love. What Bill Peyton was teaching me, reminding me of, is that in the broken bread we see the resurrected Christ.

I like to think that in some ways we are in fact, all just walking one another home. We may not live on or near the Emmaus road, Emmaus may not be our home, but I think of home as that place where we are loved unconditionally, we're accepted for who we are, we're safe. And I suspect that is how the disciples felt that night in the breaking of the bread accepted, connected, in relationship. Just a few days ago, we lost John Prine, a singer/songwriter whose work I have always admired. And in a song that he wrote very late in his career, he says, "Come on home. Come on home. You don't have to be alone. Just come on home." I hope that you will reach out. You'll widen the circle of care. Remember that you're not alone and that in our vulnerability, in our grief and our sadness and our uncertainty, we are nevertheless, all together. And I'm so glad to be on the journey with you. Amen.