

“The Road Continues”

The title for today’s sermon is something of a mistake. As I was preparing the worship page for the April newsletter, I looked much too quickly at the Gospel assigned, saw that it was from Luke 24. Since Luke 24 shows up every year on the Third Sunday of Easter, I thought that it was the earlier part of the chapter where Jesus draws alongside two disciples who are heading out of Jerusalem on their way to Emmaus. Hence, I chose the theme having to do with a road, since that is a somewhat prominent feature of that story.

Had I actually looked at the text, I would have realized that the reading is the follow-up to that account . . . in essence, what happens after those two disciples hightail it back to Jerusalem and report their encounter with the Risen Christ. I stewed for a while this week as to whether or not I should just change the title of the sermon; but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed right to keep it. It does seem to me that all of the post-Easter appearance narratives suggest that “the road continues.”

The road alluded to, of course, is life. The Bible uses such imagery throughout to describe our lives in this world: journey, pilgrimage, walk — all of these come into play as we try to describe our life in Christ.

That has its foundation, I surmise, with the wilderness wandering of the Hebrews as they came out of Egypt; but even before that Abraham is told to get going to a place he did not know by a route he had never seen before. As the people of Israel come out of Exile in Babylon, the language is filled with promises of how God will prepare the road for their passage back to the Promised Land. We hear of the prophet Elijah on the run being given food brought to him by ravens and ***“in the strength of that food, he went forty days and forty nights.”*** As we will hear over the next several Sundays, Jesus will send out His disciples to be His witnesses, which would necessitate for many of them extensive travel.

We continue to hear such allusions in the Christian community of our day. If someone strays from a proscribed lifestyle, the question becomes, *“Did you lose your walk?”* When someone dies, we speak of it as the end of their journey. At funerals we pray for those of us who *“are still in our pilgrimage, and who walk as yet by faith, that Your Holy Spirit may lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days.”*

Lent is described as a journey, a pilgrimage. We walk with Jesus as He travels inexorably toward Jerusalem and the cross. The final path is known as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Pain or Sorrow, where He carries His cross to Golgotha. For some, it appears that Easter is the end of the road. Once we get to Easter, we’re done (of course many of those who demonstrate that attitude have not walked with Jesus for much of the way to get to Easter) . . . but the road continues.

The twentieth-century philosopher, Anthony Flew, started his academic career as an avowed atheist. In 2004, he published a book with the title, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. He had, since 1986, been looking into the concept of God and slowly came to the conclusion of what would turn out to be his last publication.

He had gained fame for, among other reasons, a parable he adapted in a debate, and later printed in one of his books, about an exchange between two men who chanced upon a well-tended clearing. One man considered that a gardener must have been responsible for this lovely space; the other man argued that there is no gardener. They pitched a tent, and waited to see if the gardener to show up. When the gardener does not appear, the first man posits that he is invisible. So they set a fence around the space, electrify it, install cameras, but nothing seems to come in contact. Finally, in despair, the second man wonders, *“Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”*

Dr. Flew later published a second parable which told this account: Two men were walking down the same road toward a distant, unseen city. The

journey begins to become burdensome, and both men grow weary of walking. As they sit for a spell, one man expresses his doubts that there even is a city up ahead. The second man is positive that the city will be there, and they should continue their journey. But the more he thinks about it, the more convinced the first man becomes that nothing awaits them on the road ahead but more of the same. The second man, with confidence that the future down the road holds great promise, heads out on his journey, leaving the first man to sit . . . for an eternity?

Flew's point in the first parable was that faith is not logical, to which I plead "*Guilty!*" — never claimed that it was. Admitting that faith is not logical does not necessarily make it illogical, that it is opposed to logic. Faith is alogical. It conveys a truth that reason cannot fathom or penetrate. The atheistic Anthony Flew regarded that as rubbish and nonsense.

His point in the second parable is that hope is the one thing we must maintain or life's journey is meaningless. He came to understand that critically important is what is the object, and therefore the content, of that hope.

It is to that point that we hear St. John today in his First Letter. "***Beloved, we are God's children now . . .***" All hope has to be grounded in a reality, or it is just wishful thinking. The reality for us that we are God's children.

Then John intensifies it with the word "***now.***" I'd be inclined to print that in extra large bold italic capital letters. We are God's children; we know what that means. We know love, acceptance, forgiveness, grace; we comprehend God's directions, guidance, instruction; we pay attention to what God is doing and we see His hand at work in our lives and in our world; and we hear His call to us to live out the faith He provides to us. We are God's children now . . . we know that, we believe that, we live on that basis.

What we do not yet know is all that this will mean for the future. John writes: "***. . . what we will be has not yet been revealed.***" So we walk the

road with the confidence that we are God's. But the city up ahead? We do not know what it looks like, or how long it will take to get there, or what obstacles, dangers, or adventures lie before us on the journey. We just walk. We are on the road. The road continues.

Then John adds: ***“What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”*** He labels that “hope” — the final revelation from God that will complete and completely transform us . . . ***“we will be like him”*** Yet that is also what we must be busy to do on the road.

Jesus charges His disciples in today's Gospel: ***“. . . repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed . . . to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”*** I beg you to take note that Jesus did not leave this as a option. There is no *“if you have time or inclination . . .”* He does not say, *“It would be really nice if . . .”* No mention is made of alternatives: ***“repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed,”*** no if's, and's, or but's.

Now we need to look at those to whom these words are spoken. When Jesus first appears to them in Luke's account, ***“They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”*** I don't know how many of you have seen a dead person alive, but I've come close. I have told this story before, so I will just “bare bones it.” One of my members in Euclid died after a long illness and I officiated at his burial. Months later, driving down Lakeshore Boulevard, I saw a man on the sidewalk who looked just like him. I almost crashed my car as I gawked at the apparition. “Startled?” Yes. “Terrified?” not quite; shocked might be a better term. “Thought I was seeing a ghost?” I don't know. To this day I have not figured out what I actually saw that day, and I never saw the sidewalk figure again. So I can relate to the disciples as Jesus comes upon them.

Of course, they had other reasons to be shocked and terrified; they had, after all, turned tail and run out on Jesus at the crucial (and I use that word with emphasis, “the crucial”) moment. Did He come back to punish

them? Was this payback time? Whatever their thoughts or fears, Jesus does two things to settle them down: he shows them His hands and feet; hHe asked them for something to eat.

So, the startled, terrified, and possibly guilt-ridden disciples are now told to proclaim. Jesus would not regard them as ready for that until He had done what Luke tells us He did: ***“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures . . .”*** Here’s where many of us get sidetracked on the journey.

We don’t know how or what to proclaim because we have not taken the time to have our minds really opened to the Word of God. I don’t mean the ten-minute devotions that many do daily, or periodically. I mean jump-in and get immersed in the Word so it becomes a part of who you are . . . it becomes your spiritual DNA.

This is important because on the road there will be times and places where you will need to know what God is saying and what direction He wants to give you. There will be times when the temptations come and you won’t know how to resist. There will be occasions when your life is so turned upside-down that you won’t be able to think straight. In such moments, you will need the enlightenment that only God can provide, and that He does provide through His Word.

The road continues. It is a road we travel, because the alternative is to sit down by the side of the road and abandon hope. We do not travel alone. As the narrative in Luke’s Gospel that precedes today’s Gospel makes clear, Jesus draws alongside us. We also walk together with each other along this road.

So if see that you are tired or weighed down, I will come to help. When you see that I am stressed or upset, you will reach out to offer a shoulder to lean on, a hand to comfort, an ear to listen. Should we see that another begins to stray away from the road, we call them back gently and invitingly. If any are struggling to continue along the road, we reach out with support — physical, emotional, spiritual, relational.

There will others on the side of the road who have not yet ventured forth. They have no sense that road leads anywhere. They do not trust that they are to walk the road; that the road is for them. They may be hesitant to venture forth, and most likely will not so venture alone. So we need to invite them. We need to make our company of fellow-travelers so inviting and welcoming that others just want to come along with us. This road is a communal highway, and the journey is a journey among friends.

The road does not end at Easter; by no means. The road continues. He is risen! He has appeared to us, and walks with us along the road; and He tells us as we walk, “. . . *repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed . . .*”

Ready to go? Good, the on-ramp is just ahead.

Amen.