

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Discipleship Is for Travelers

Luke 24:13-35

On Sunday morning, we assume that meeting Jesus requires some traveling. We have to get up and go to church. We have to cover some ground in order to get to Jesus in the gathering of his people. True, we can now cover that ground much more quickly and easily through technology. With the click of a mouse, folks in many churches can make the trip to the sanctuary and worship via livestream. Or if, as in our case, there's a recording of the sermon, you can choose the day and time that you'll "attend church." It all starts to feel like Jesus on demand.

But in today's text from Luke, it's not about Jesus' followers seeking him out and going to where he is. It's about Jesus coming to where they are. And in this case, not a house of worship, but a dusty path on the way to Emmaus. It was a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. On the evening of that first Easter Sunday, two of his disciples were making the trip on foot, when Jesus showed up, walked alongside them, and joined in their conversation. At first they don't recognize him, but by the time we reach the end of the story their eyes have been opened.

In this case, Jesus' revelation of himself isn't rushed. Through extended conversation, patient unfolding of the Scriptures, and the unhurried breaking of bread, Jesus discloses his identity to these followers. It takes time for Jesus to call forth belief. For Cleopas and his unnamed companion, faith is more of a journey than a moment.

This isn't surprising, given Luke's fondness for journeys. In Luke's two-volume work (the Gospel and the book of Acts) journeying is a prominent motif. Jesus' birth is set in the context of his parents' journey from Galilee to Bethlehem. During the course of his ministry, Jesus is constantly encountering people while on the way from one place to another. The entire middle section of Luke's Gospel, sometimes called the "Travel Narrative," covers Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he enters into his suffering and death. And now here we are in today's text, after the resurrection, with Jesus appearing to people who were "on the way" (v. 35). So Luke's story of Jesus, followed by his story of the early church and the spread of the gospel, are not for or about people who want to stay put in their faith. No, discipleship is for travelers.

During the coronavirus pandemic, travel has been hit hard. Prior to COVID-19, we were accustomed to coming and going as we pleased. Then suddenly there were travel bans, closed borders, and shelter-in-place orders. When things were beginning to shut down and we started isolating in our homes, trips of various sorts got cancelled or put on hold. Only the most basic or essential travel was permitted. A trip to the store. A trip to the doctor. A trip to the office or workplace, if absolutely necessary. For lots of us, travel came to mean walking from one room to another in the house, or if you felt really adventurous going to the mailbox and back.

Last October, airlines in some Asian countries with low COVID rates began offering “flights to nowhere.” For instance, Australian airline Qantas offered a seven-hour flight that performed a giant loop taking in some of the country’s most scenic spots and territories. Other countries offered shorter versions of these trips, including in-flight entertainment and local cuisine. The idea was simple. You take off from and land at the same airport. It’s purely for the purpose of the journey, not the destination.

In Luke’s Gospel, destinations matter. But a lot of the most important stuff happens during the journey itself, including the one to Emmaus. It’s no surprise that we don’t just speak of this text as the Emmaus story. We speak of it as the road to Emmaus. It’s not just about that moment at the table when bread is broken and eyes are fully opened. It’s also about all that happens along the way, when Jesus is present and working.

A lot of Jesus’ working happens during the walking. Moment by moment, step by step, Jesus engages with Cleopas and his companion as they make their way along the route. Maybe one of the things you, like many others, have discovered, or rediscovered, over the past year, is the blessing of taking a walk. Especially during the early stages of the pandemic, walking was one of the few activities we could do outside of our homes. Perhaps you have a street in your neighborhood, a path in a park, or some other spot where you can go to enjoy this underappreciated form of travel and mobility.

In first century Palestine, walking wasn’t primarily a form of leisure or exercise, but a way of life. Traveling from point A to point B often meant getting there on foot. At a relaxed pace, the walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus would have taken about two and a half hours. That’s a lot of steps, and a lot of time for thinking, reflecting, and talking. A few years ago, a BBC article bemoaned the death of “purposeless walking.” In other words, walking not just as a luxury or form of exercise but as a time to reflect, observe, and explore our inner selves. As one person has captured it: “We think that we win when we move faster or fill our time. But we simply *don’t*. Empty time to be physical and reflect produces things—creativity, neighborhood connection, humility—that are impossible to get in a car seat or from a phone screen.”¹

Granted, I can imagine today’s story relocated in a more contemporary setting, with Jesus catching a ride with these two disciples. They don’t know who he is. Cleopas is at the wheel. The other disciple is in the passenger seat. Jesus is in the back seat, quoting Scripture and showing them how a suffering and dying Messiah was part of God’s purpose to redeem his people and rule the world. The problem with this version, though, is that covering the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus by car might only take 10 to 15 minutes. That’s a lot less time for patient conversation and careful reflection on Jesus’ death, as well as reports that he’s been seen alive. Plus, they would reach Emmaus long before sunset, and lose out on the opportunity to have Jesus come in and spend the evening with them. So traveling by automobile might be more efficient, but traveling on foot gives Jesus more of the time he needs for the sometimes slow work of revelation.

The speed at which we live our lives, even though it can make us feel more efficient and productive, can also work against our need for deeper communion with Christ. In order to cultivate a relationship with the Lord, and grow in your fellowship with him and his people, you often need to decelerate and be more attentive to Christ’s presence in the moment. W. E. Adams, who served as C. S. Lewis’s spiritual director for a season, once said,

We can advance along the road to perfection only by walking closely with [Jesus]. And as we watch His way of dealing with the countless problems and troubles that beset His life, we achieve wisdom as to how to meet our own. But to walk with Jesus is to walk with a slow,

unhurried pace. Hurry is the death of prayer and only impedes and soils our work. It never advances it.²

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan tells about some conversations he had with Wang Mingdao, one of the most widely known and persecuted pastors in China during the past century. The first time they met, Wang Mingdao asked him, "Young man, how do you walk with God?" Boyd-MacMillan listed of a set of spiritual disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer. And Wang Mingdao mischievously retorted, "Wrong answer. To walk with God, you must go at walking pace." Boyd-MacMillan says that those words touched him deeply. "How can I talk about the Christian life as walking with God when I so often live it at a sprint? ... Jesus is inviting me to walk with him. Too often, I find myself running for him. There's a difference!"³

As hard and difficult as the past year has been, the ways that it has slowed us down in various parts of our lives has been a gift. We've faced circumstances that required us to focus less on how much our calendars are filled and more on how much our souls are filled with relationships that give life a kind of depth and direction that aren't possible any other way. One person who wrote of her battle with the physical symptoms of COVID-19, but also the benefits that came with more careful self-examination, put it this way:

Sitting in isolation with zero distraction was unnerving because then I had no choice other than to really *be with* everything that was unfolding. As I lay bedridden, I found myself reflecting on my life, pondering not what I had accomplished but who I had been along the way. Had I been kind to my family and friends? Had I taken full responsibility for my mistakes? Had I expressed myself fully and let the world see who I really am?⁴

She speaks of who she had been "along the way." We speak of our lives as a "journey." It's a term that can get old and worn out. But there's still a lot of truth in it. Looking back at your life journey, you can see more clearly what has happened along the way. The disciples in today's text didn't fully grasp what was happening while it was happening, but in hindsight they were able to say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us" (v. 32). On the road. Along the way. That's where communion with Christ happens. Not just in a single moment, but on the way. As I said earlier, discipleship is for travelers. It's for those who see themselves as being in motion, patiently walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

For those who are truly following him in daily life, this way leads to a destination called the reign of God, which will be fully unveiled to us at the coming of our Lord. But even now, he comes. He draws up alongside us and walks the present leg of the journey with us, saying and doing more than we often comprehend or imagine. Somewhere further down the path, you may be able to look back and see more clearly how he was with you and what he was accomplishing. And even when he's elusive, such that you can't pin him down in one place, it's often because he's going on ahead of you, calling you forward and taking you further into your life and his mission.

¹ Finlo Rohrer, "The slow death of purposeless walking," BBC (May 1, 2014).

² Quoted in Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) 93.

³ Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006) 307.

⁴ Radha Ruparell, "How Getting COVID-19 Forced Me to Re-examine My Life." Greater Good Magazine website. October 12, 2020. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_getting_covid_19_forced_me_to_reexamine_my_life (April 29, 2021).