



“Walking Through the Twilight”

Luke 24:13-35

Yvette D. Wilson
Minister-in-Residence

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First Sunday after Easter

Prayer: Lord, we who have ears to hear, let us hear. We who have eyes to see, let us see by the power of your Holy Spirit. And let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you; for you, O Lord, are my help and my redeemer. Amen.

It was a week ago today that several women went to the tomb where Jesus was laid to rest and found that the stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled back, and that Jesus was not there. When a vision of angels told them that Jesus was alive, the women returned to their group and broke the news. We celebrated that news — that Jesus was raised from the dead — last week on Easter Sunday. I’m sure some in the congregation felt hope that something unexpected could possibly roll away the stones in their lives and bring their dead situation back to life. It’s a kind of hope that can put a smile on your face because you’re anticipating a change in your situation, a change in your life. For others sitting in the pews, I can imagine they were just as astounded as the members of the group depicted in our gospel lesson were. I can imagine some in our gospel lesson became silent; while others uttered, “That’s impossible.” I can picture some with their eyes open wide, eyebrows raised, foreheads wrinkled, and jaws dropped. Some probably fell to their knees, while others became frozen in time. What an element of surprise at an unexpected event that scripture says Jesus anticipated and foretold.

For weeks I meditated on our lesson; the more I read it, the more I was amused by the exchange between Jesus and the two people walking on the road. I kept thinking, if I had just heard that Jesus was still alive and I was with the two travelers, I would have probably turned to every person who had a remote resemblance to Jesus and asked, “Jesus? Are you Jesus? Oh, sorry, wrong person,” while the recipients of my question looked at me strangely. And the person who drew near to the travelers would have definitely been asked those questions by me. I wonder what Jesus’ response would have been. But the text doesn’t tell us that they asked, and I wasn’t there to invoke the questions. Our lesson just tells us that our travelers were “talking and discussing” when Jesus drew near, and that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Two travelers, astounded in the beginning, are now described as looking sad, wondering why Jesus did not redeem Israel. But nowhere in our lesson do they ask the question of where Jesus could be or mention that Jesus could still, possibly, redeem Israel, since they had heard Jesus was alive.

So what’s going on with these two travelers in our lesson? They are in the twilight, which is a place of confusion. Their vision is blurred. They are so bewildered by what’s happened

to Jesus, they cannot recognize a person who should be the most familiar to them. Jesus knew they were perplexed. He understood it was difficult for them to grasp that he had been raised from the dead, and he knew they could not conceptualize at that moment what was next, let alone what the notion of redemption was really supposed to look like. But not untypical of Jesus, he began to challenge their underlying assumptions about how they were interpreting the scriptures — in particular, as the scriptures related to him — without disclosing that he was speaking of himself. As they walked through the twilight, Jesus is talking, explaining the scriptures in a way that they never heard before. What Jesus was saying began to remove some of the ambiguity the travelers had. It removed some of the obstacles that were standing in their way. But they still did not recognize Jesus.

As they walked through the twilight — that period between sunset and darkness, the time of day when the sun is just below the horizon — as they walked through their state of uncertainty, trying to put all the pieces of the puzzle together about the events surrounding Jesus, they asked their traveling companion to stay with them where they would eat and rest. And when they reclined at the table, as was the custom, their new traveling friend took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized that he was Jesus.

I know what it's like not to see clearly. On Wednesday last week, I drove to work early in the morning and found a parking spot on the west side of Riverside Drive. I got out of my car and walked to the sign to get a careful look at what it said, to make sure that I was in the right spot. It looked okay to me, so I went on my merry way to work. At the end of my workday, a little after 5 pm, I walked to Riverside Drive to get my car to drive to downtown Manhattan to a meeting I had at 6 pm, but my car was not where I parked it. I stood for a second and thought, "but this is the place where I parked." When I looked up at the parking sign, it said "No Standing." My mouth flew open as I thought, "Oh, my goodness, I can't believe I read the sign wrong; I can't believe I didn't see that it said 'No Standing.'" My car had been towed. I felt like I was in the twilight zone, a place of confusion. My vision had been blurred, but at the end of the day I recognized what the sign actually said.

These two travelers finally recognized Jesus as the one whom they had been talking about. Jesus, at the table as a guest, had become the host and they were able to recognize Jesus because he did something they recognized that was associated only with him. Maybe it was how Jesus took the bread; the motion/movement of his hands; how he held it with tenderness; his words and the tone of his blessing; the intention behind his words expressing sincerity and authenticity; how he broke it; the graceful way he split the bread in two; how he gave it to them with love and in love that without words in that moment of giving, echoed to them "remember me."

Our travelers' eyes were now opened to see Jesus as the sign of direction, a sign of victory and hope for a life after death.

In the church calendar, there are fifty days between Easter (the day Jesus was resurrected) and Pentecost (the day the Holy Spirit was given to the Church). It is a time to walk through the twilight, through any blurred vision we may have, and see new life emerging around us. Sometimes we may need to walk while talking it through, as our travelers did with Jesus. We may need to be open to a new way of understanding the world around us and how we fit in it, and contribute to it by being a source of life and light. In other instances, we may need something to trigger our memory of what is life-giving and causes a burning in our hearts to pursue our God-given gifts and talents, using them to spread the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our church should be the container of those life-sustaining memories and, like Jesus, our churches should be reenacting those rituals to remind us why our faith in Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christianity, is so important

to share, as Jesus did in the sharing of the bread symbolizing nourishment that sustains life.

In the mid-1950s, H. Richard Niebuhr, Professor of Christian Theology at Yale University, along with Daniel Day Williams, Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary, and James M. Gustafson, then on the staff of the Study of Theological Education in the U.S. and Canada, wrote on "The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry." They described the Church as "a community of memory and hope, sharing in the common memory not only of Jesus Christ but also of the mighty deeds of God known by Israel, expecting the coming into full view of the kingdom on earth and/or in heaven."

They also wrote that

[T]he Church is local and it is universal. Where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ there he is present, but all to which he points and all that he incarnates is present also. Among other things the universal Church is present, for Jesus Christ cannot be there without bringing with him the whole company of his brothers [and sisters], who have heard the Word of God and kept it... In the language of Christianity love of God and neighbor is both "law" and "gospel"; it is both the requirement laid on [human beings] by the Determiner of all things and the gift given... It is the demand inscribed into infinitely aspiring human nature by the Creator; its perversion in idolatry, hostility and self-centeredness is the heart of man's tragedy; its reconstruction, redirection and empowerment is redemption from evil. Love of God and neighbor is the gift given through Jesus Christ by the demonstration in incarnation, words, deeds, death and resurrection that God is love—a demonstration we but poorly apprehend yet sufficiently discern to be moved to a faltering response of reciprocal love.

Then, taking a compelling position, the authors wrote:

[T]he purpose of the gospel is not simply that we should believe in the love of God; it is that we should love [God] and neighbor. Faith in God's love toward [human beings] is perfected in [human beings'] love to God and neighbor. We love in incompleteness, not as redeemed but in the time of redemption, not in attainment but in hope. Through Jesus Christ we receive enough faith in God's love toward us to see at least the need for, and the possibility of, a responsive love on our part. We know enough of the possibility of love to God on our part to long for its perfection; we see enough of the reality of God's love toward us and neighbor to hope for its full revelation and so for our full response.

As we walk through the twilight that may sometimes enter our lives, may we always recognize our church as the holder of the memories of Jesus, through our worship service, and every time we love our neighbor as ourselves. May the traditions of our Christian faith always remind us of God's love for us through Jesus Christ, and as we are opened up to the scriptures more and more, may our hearts burn causing us to share those memories with everyone we encounter.

Amen