

To Those Walking Away

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Acts 2:14a, 36-41, Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, 1 Peter 1:17-23, [Luke 24:13-35](#)

Look. Do you see them there? Two people traveling down the well-worn road that leads from Jerusalem to Emmaus. I think you should meet them. One of them is a man. He is named Cleopas. The other one is left unnamed which may be an indication, according to the customs of that society, that she is a woman and possibly Cleopas' wife.

Or maybe there's another reason for why she or he is left unnamed. There is something about having an unnamed and undescribed character in a story that you tell. It invites your reader to describe that character with their own imagination. Which usually means, of course, that you create the character in your own image.

It is an invitation to your readers to put something of themselves into the story. In other words, maybe the gospel writer is inviting you to see yourself as that other disciple walking to Emmaus. And so, let me ask the question. What are you doing on this day walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus?

What Day is it?

The day itself is obviously significant. The story begins by noting that this is taking place on the same day. What day is that? Well, it is Sunday. But not just any Sunday. It is still Easter Sunday. I know that is two weeks ago for us, but you need to imagine yourself on Easter day. Why, on this day of all days, are you walking to Emmaus?

And let's make it plain. What are you doing walking away from the church? Because the church, such as it is, such as it exists at this point in time, is in Jerusalem. And there, in itself, is a question that is worth dwelling on for a moment because it is a timely question. We live in a time when many seem to be walking away from the church. Why?

Preaching to those Not Here

I realize that there is some problem with me raising that question in this particular context. This is a problematic thing that preachers do all of the time. You see, we preachers have a certain tendency to preach to the people who aren't here. We see all of the people who, for whatever reason, seem to be wandering away from the church and that is understandably distressing. But of course, it is just plain wrong to take any frustration that we feel about that out on the people who actually show up at church.

I'm sure you all understand how unfair that is. So, I want to be very clear that I'm hardly speaking to you personally when I raise these issues, but I do not think that we can afford to just ignore a strong tendency in our society. Many are wandering away from the church, and, without being accusatory, it is important for us to try and understand why.

Why are you Walking Away?

So put yourself on that road to Emmaus. Ask yourself why, on this day of all days, you find yourself walking away from the church? Let's admit that the church really hasn't performed very well up until this



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point in the story. You just have to look at the top part of this chapter in the Gospel of Luke to see that.

This day started with a great triumph. Jesus was raised from the dead, shattering the power of sin and decay. But in terms of the church's response to this triumph, things have not been so victorious.

The Church Reacts Poorly

The women went to the tomb, seeking to prepare the body for burial. But then the body was missing, and two men told them that Jesus was not there because he was risen. The women then returned to the male disciples to tell them about what they had seen. It was at this point that things kind of went off the rails. The gospel tells us that, **“these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”** And then Peter ran out to examine the tomb, finding nothing but folded linens.

So, what we see is that God has done something amazing in and for the church, but the church is struggling to absorb and understand what has happened. In their confusion, they even seem to be turning against one another. At least some of them, the men, do not trust what they are hearing from others, the women.

And so, this seems to be one of the reasons why these two disciples are walking away from the church. They don't like that sense of confusion and people turning against one another. And, honestly, if that's what you've been experiencing, why would we blame you if you started to walk away?

Attitude Towards the Women

At one point, when the two disciples are discussing unknowingly with the risen Jesus, they do seem to tip their hand to something else that has upset them. **“Moreover, some women of our group astounded us,”** they say. **“They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.”**

Did you notice the subtle shift there from what is said at the beginning of the chapter? When the women were at the tomb early in the morning, there was no talk of visions. They saw and spoke to two men, who I think we can presume were angels. But now, when other people talk about it, it has become a vision.

This seems to be an intentional denigration of the experience of the women at the tomb. At the very least, they seem to be questioning the genuineness of the experiences of these women.

But they have experienced at least something of the power of the resurrection. At this point in the story, they are the only ones who have done so. It doesn't seem to be a very helpful indication that their experience has been minimized.

Respecting One Another

And here then is something else that seems to be leading people to walk away from the church. If we cannot give respect to what other people experience of God, we are going to keep running into trouble. We need to be listening to each other. We need to be willing to be open to what other people have experienced of God. That doesn't mean that everybody else is always right about what they say about their experience. We are all capable of making mistakes. But we need to be willing to respect one another's spiritual journeys.

Expectations about Jesus

But there is something else that these two travelers note that seems to have led to them to be walking away. When they are asked how about why it is that they are looking so dejected, they tell the

apparent stranger walking with them about everything that has happened to Jesus over the last few days. Then they let it slip what it is, exactly, that distresses them about what has happened. **“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,”** they say.

So, they are aware of what Jesus has done. They are perhaps even aware that things could not have happened any differently, and that what did happen was God’s will. But they stumble over something. Things just didn’t turn out as they expected.

Our Reaction when Expectations aren’t Met

And there is the rub, isn’t it? We all carry expectations into the life of the church. Sometimes those expectations are good things, sometimes they are impossible things, and sometimes they are just expectations that don’t quite fit into what God’s plan is. But whatever expectations we bring into the life of the church, we will be disappointed in some way at some point. And when that happens, the impulse is often to just walk away.

I understand the response, though I know it is not always what we should be doing. Sometimes it means that we will miss out on the very best plans that God has for us. But if in some way, you find yourself walking away from the church in these difficult times, it is probably true that unfulfilled expectations have something to do with it.

So let’s put ourselves on that road to Emmaus for a few moments. Can we at least try to understand why some may feel as if they are walking or drifting away? It is a helpful exercise.

Persuading them to Turn Around

But the best part about this story is that it doesn’t just end up with these two disciples wandering right away. At the end of the story, they turn around and they go back. They have gathered together with the church seemingly before the end of the same day. The church is reunited and has found strength that it never knew that it had. And we need to ask what it is that leads to such a happy ending, because it might be something that we are in need of today.

So, what do the two walking disciples experience that leads them to turn around. They experience the risen Jesus. That is the most important point. But it is how they have that experience that we need to focus on this morning.

Experiencing Jesus through the Scriptures

The experience of the presence of the risen Jesus happens for them in two ways as they travel down the road. First, they experience Jesus through the scriptures. The stranger explains to them, using the Bible, important truths about Jesus. **“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”**

Now, this explanation of scripture does not exactly make them totally encounter the presence of Jesus, but it certainly brings them much closer. As they remark to each other later, **“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”**

And Through the Sacraments

And then, of course, the presence of Jesus is made absolutely unmistakable when Jesus breaks the bread. And I think it should be clear what that represents. It is a reference to the early church’s practice of communion.

So, on one level, the message of the story is obvious. These travellers encounter and are convinced of the reality of the risen Jesus by their participation in two key practices of the church – the preaching of the scriptures and the practices of sacraments like communion. The promise of the story to the church is that, as we continue in these practices, we will experience the risen Jesus too.

Experiencing this Outside the Church

And that is true, but I have to note that, for these two disciples who are walking away from the church, they obviously don't hear the scriptures preached or receive the sacraments in the church. They somehow experience them outside of the church and it is that experience that prompts their return to the church. And here, I think, is the true challenge that is facing the church today.

There was perhaps a time when you could expect that people would wander away from the church for a while, but they would just eventually find their way back. They would come in and experience the scriptures being preached, the sacraments rightly celebrated, and the community and they would just find their place again.

There was a time, for example, when people just sort of seemed to expect that young folk, once they came to a certain age or perhaps went off to university or to start a career, that they would just leave the church. But that was okay, we were assured, because it would all work out and they would all come back again at some point, probably when they had children. And I'm sure that there was a time when it did work like that. It doesn't work like that anymore. It hasn't for some time.

How Can we Do What Jesus did for these Disciples?

So, I suspect that we are in an age when we need to be thinking in terms of what Jesus does for these two disciples who are wandering away from the church. We, like he does, need to find ways to join people on their journeys where they are, even if they are walking away. We need to take the time and make the effort to understand where they are.

And, most of all, we need to find ways to allow the nature of the church at its very best to come to them where they are. I do not think that that necessarily means that we need to go out and interpret the scriptures directly to people or take them the sacraments. I think those things are symbolic of taking the whole of what the church is to people where they are.

Wherever people are, it has to be our task to carry the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ out to them. We need to be as Christ to them. We cannot guarantee that, when we do that, they will all turn around and start walking back to the church, but some will. And whether any do or not, spreading that grace and that love in practical ways will absolutely mean that the message of hope that we have heard in Jesus Christ is spreading in the world. And we will be fulfilling what Jesus is calling us to be.