

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
4.30.17; Easter 3A
Lk 24:13-35

Eucharistic Travelers

Have you ever thought about what kind of traveler you are? I know I have. Do you prefer to do a lot of planning before you start off on a trip getting all your ducks in a row or do you just prefer to go? Do you pack light, simply and quickly or do you prefer to pack and pack to your heart's delight anticipating every conceivable need? Do you find yourself wanting to travel when you need an escape from your troubles or needing to fly away from a painful situation? Perhaps you prefer to not travel at all because of all the hassles—isn't that one of the attractions of having a stay-cation? Maybe you prefer to travel only in your mind to places you have been or dream to go—not a bad option if the bank account is a bit low.

In today's gospel story from Luke, we have two very ordinary and weary travelers that will eventually become extraordinary Eucharistic travelers full of new life and hearts that burned with joy and renewed hope. I am reminded of a recent quote by Pope Francis, "The people of God are the fire within the heart of God." But that is not where these two travelers started.

We aren't given much information about who they are. One is named. One is not. They are disciples of Jesus but not part of the original twelve. And yet, in the beginning of their journey, they do not recognize Him. They could be a husband and wife. Why do I say this? Just to remind us not to automatically assume that they are both men. Women play prominent roles in the Gospel of Luke.

It is very likely they have recently been to Jerusalem. They were engaged in deep conversation about all the things that had happened surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. They were in intense grief and likely weary from trying to figure it all out. They had a lot on their minds. Was Jesus' resurrection from the dead only an idle tale as some of the disciples initially believed, perhaps a wishful fantasy and coping mechanism to help them escape from pain or could it be a

(2)

solid basis for a wild and fierce hope? For now, heart piercing grief is what these two travelers believe to be their unmistakable and unchangeable reality. They knew it wasn't safe to stay in Jerusalem for very much longer so they had hit the open road. I bet they thought they would be traveling alone and slip out of town unnoticed by God. But they were wrong. God would be there, as He always is, there on the open road. He would be there as grace disguised.

I am reminded of the words of the psalmist, "O God, where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence...If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

One of the greatest spiritual truths we can discover is that while God is always present to us, we are not always present to God. We know this especially is true when we are experiencing intense grief or tragedy and feel God is nowhere to be found. One of the reasons we have an entire season of Easter—not just a day—is so we can deeply travel and explore this rugged terrain and hold the dynamic tension that comes from finding "grief in the midst of resurrection" and "resurrection in the midst of grief." We often find it so hard to hold this tension long enough until we find reach a transformational level of understanding and spiritual growth. Often we chose culturally approved paths of over-medicating, escaping, and denying rather than travel on the open road of faith.

A very moving, and very beautiful, story of one person's journey to find God's Easter presence in the midst of darkness is in the book, *North of Hope: A Daughter's Arctic Journey*. (This would make an excellent choice for a book study group by the way). In her compelling and gripping book, Episcopalian Shannon Huffman Polson tells the story of her struggle to find hope and new life after the horrific death of her father and her step-mother while they are on a wilderness trip in Alaska. Using the unlikely assortment of spiritual resources of Mozart's requiem, Jewish grief rituals, and the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, she finds a way to open her heart and her eyes to rediscover the felt presence of Christ.

(3)

Using her father's travel log that was recovered at the scene of his death, she courageously retraces her father's and step-mother's trip down an arctic river in the hopes of finding some closure. Facing many temptations, perils and struggles along the way, some with her own brother, she is guided by the presence of Jesus who travels with her in the form of consecrated bread and wine that her priest has sent with her in a small plastic bag.

Finally, when Shannon reaches the campsite where the attack by grizzly bears occurred, she courageously creates a sanctuary made of rocks and a simple wooden cross. Reciting part of a Eucharistic Prayer from our Episcopal prayer book, she consumes the elements, the bread and the wine, and prays for healing. And then her heart begins to burn with hope, having received the grace necessary to begin the process of restoring communion and peace with God, with nature, with her father and step-mother, and eventually herself.

Like the two Eucharistic travelers on the road to Emmaus, it was finally her time—God's time, really-- to see the mystery of faith revealed through eyes that could now see that "Christ has died. Christ has risen. And the Risen Christ will come again and again." In Shannon's own words, "On this beach, I knelt with the Good Friday God, the suffering God who had wept and bled, cried out, and died. The Easter God—that was who I'd been trying to talk to, but I wasn't ready. It wasn't time. First I had to pray to the Good Friday God, the one who suffered, before I could understand any part of the resurrection. This was the gift of my faith."

May all of us, with Shannon and the two on the road to Emmaus, and the communion of all the saints through God's abundant grace, become His Eucharistic travelers on the way to discovering a wild and fierce hope that burns brightly in our hearts and is greater than all our doubts and fears. And most importantly, always leads us back to Easter. Amen.

