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"On The Road ...Again"

Psalm 116:1-4,12-19 Luke 24:19-31 Acts 2:14;36-41 I Peter 1:17-23

I've been on the road this week. Every year our presbytery offers a retreat for pastors after Easter. This year we were at Camp Allen in Navasota. Camp Allen is the Episcopal Camp where I attended my first Presbyterian Cursillo, which now goes by the name of Presbyterian Pilgrimage. These weekend retreats are versions of an Ecumenical movement called Walk To Emmaus. How many of you have attended one of these weekends? Hear the gospel account that has inspired these weekends.

Let's pray,

Dear Lord, we are amazed at the lengths to which you went to see to it that these two followers did not get away. We thank you that you were persistent with them and we see in our own walk that you have persistently pursued us, wooed us, called us and equipped us for faith and our own ministry and mission. As we dig in to their experience with you, may we draw parallels in our own walk as we go from this place to our homes. In Jesus' name Amen.

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One dark night outside a small town, a fire started inside the local chemical plant. Before long it exploded into flames and an alarm went out to fire departments from miles around.

After fighting the fire for over an hour, the chemical company president approached the fire chief and said, "All of our formulas are in the vault in the center of the plant. They must be saved! I will give \$50,000 to the engine company that brings them out safely!"

As soon as the chief heard this, he ordered the firemen to strengthen their attack on the blaze. After two more hours of attacking the fire, the president of the company offered \$100,000 to the engine company that could bring out the company's secret files.

From the distance a lone siren was heard as another fire truck came into sight. It was a local volunteer fire company composed entirely of men over 65. To everyone's amazement the little fire engine raced through the chemical plant gates and drove straight into the middle of the inferno. In the distance the other firemen watched as the old timers hopped off of their rig and began to fight the fire with an effort that they had never seen before.

After an hour of intense fighting the volunteer company had extinguished the fire and saved the formulas. Joyous, the chemical company president announced

that he would double the reward to \$200,000 and walked over to personally thank each of the volunteers.

After thanking each of the old men individually the president asked the group what they intended to do with the reward money.

The fire truck driver looked him right in the eye and said, "The first thing we're going to do is fix the brakes on that old truck!"

Those volunteer firemen had an eye-opening experience. They didn't intend to be put in the middle of the fire, but once there, gave it all they had and wound up reaping a great reward.

Cleopas and his companion didn't intend to be put in the middle of the fire. In fact, they were going in the opposite direction of their fire. They were followers of Jesus. They had seen his miracles and been a part of the crowd that cheered him when he entered the city a week before. Then it happened – the terror and the unbelievable nightmare of darkness which engulfed him and them so suddenly. They saw him crucified. They saw him taken out to a place of degradation and shame and strung up like a common criminal.

They had believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would redeem Israel. There had been some convincing evidence: the power of his preaching, his healing ministry, the miracles he performed, and his mastery even of nature. His refusal to be controlled either by political or religious power blocks, the prophetic witness of his presence with the poor and oppressed, all served as evidence that this man was their long-awaited Messiah.

There were rumors whispered about that his tomb was empty, that the women had come back after sunrise with the wild story about an angel speaking to them, about the stone being rolled back, and the grave clothes lying in the cave. In their depressed state of mind, such stories seemed like "idle tales." They say to their new fellow traveler, "Are you the only person in all of Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place?"

For us, this is a great inside joke. We know that it is Jesus talking to them but they don't. It brings a knowing smile to our lips to hear them asking Jesus if he was the only person in Jerusalem who didn't know what happened to himself.

What really is remarkable is how Jesus responded to the question of these travelers. He opens the Scriptures to them he begins to interpret them and explains to them how all these things were spoken of by Moses and the Prophets. He transforms their thinking. Too soon they had concluded that Jesus' mission had failed. However, because of Jesus' patient explanations they came to understand that the last three days were God's plan all along. Even still, they did not recognize who this man was.

Finally, they arrive in Emmaus, and Jesus acts as if he was going on. The two beg Jesus not to go on and invite Jesus to dinner. Jesus transforms that event. Though he is their guest, he takes the bread and assumes the role of host. There, at that ordinary dinner at the end of the day this guest takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it to them...and their eyes are opened and they recognized him. THAT was an eye-opening experience! The only problem was that as soon as their eyes were opened to see who he really was there was no one to see! Jesus was gone. He vanished.

The resurrection changes everything. It transformed them and it transforms us. It takes two sad friends on the road home and has them heading into the heart of the fire! It moves us from despair to new possibilities of life. It transforms ordinary bread into a holy meal. It takes us in our blindness and opens our eyes.

When they realize that it is the risen Lord who is with them and he vanishes they turn to each other and say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us ... on the road?"

Isn't that true to life? We usually don't understand what is happening to us until our eyes are opened and we are changed. Then we look back and we see the conviction of our hearts as the result of eye-opening experiences.

Jesus is still giving folks eye-opening experiences. He doesn't appear in person like he did to Cleopas and his friend. Since Jesus ascended into heaven, he reveals himself and his presence through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may speak to us and open our eyes to see something about Jesus through our reading of the scriptures or through something we see in nature. On morning as I rounded the corner from my room at Camp Allen I saw a bright red cardinal at my feet. Then next morning I saw a rabbit at my feet. The Holy Spirit sometimes chooses to reveal Jesus' presence to us and speak to us through other people. Sometimes he does it through angels disguised as people.

I want to close with a story of another two that almost got away. Pastor Glen Barnes of the First Baptist Church of Lodi, California tells about an experience he had. Barnes' church was hosting a couple of visitors, two women, from Lesotho, South Africa. According to Barnes these two women had an incredible ministry caring for the poor and sick in South Africa, especially those suffering from AIDS. Unfortunately this ministry was taking a toll on them physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact, one of the women shared with Barnes in confidence that she was really struggling, feeling burned out and wondering if it was time to move on to another ministry. As they talked about trying to hear God's voice, she said that sometimes she just wished God would write it on the sky. Then she would know whether she was doing God's will or not.

Later that very same day Barnes and these two ladies went on a little sightseeing tour of San Francisco. They went out on a boat onto San Francisco Bay. They

went by Alcatraz and under the Golden Gate Bridge. About half way out on their journey, they heard a rumbling like thunder in the sky and they looked up and right above them flew the Blue Angels, the aerobatic team of Navy jets that entertain for special events. The two African women looked terrified and one asked Barnes if America was under attack. He reassured them that it was just a show.

As a part of the magnificent aerial demonstration, one of the planes took off over the city, turned its smoke stream on and went straight up, and it began skywriting. What it wrote was not a word or a sentence, but a symbol. The jet left floating, written in the sky, a big AIDS ribbon. Pastor Barnes looked over at his new friend who was struggling with her work back home attending to AIDS sufferers. He had chills up and down his spine when he saw the ribbon in the clouds. She literally had tears running down her face as it seemed God, on this occasion, had literally written His answer to her in the sky. (1) It was written, of course by an angel....a Blue Angel.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience--less dramatic, maybe, but an experience in which God spoke to you. You were at the end of your rope, hanging on for dear life. And then, a friend said something and you realized this was a message from God. Or you heard a song, or read a story, and it was as if Christ was speaking directly to you. This happens most often to those who are believers. Notice that after Christ's resurrection, he showed himself only to those who had believed in him. He didn't appear to Herod or Pilate. That's true in our lives. If you have surrounded yourself with a veil of skepticism, you might not hear God speak. But if, in your time of trial, you ask God to show Himself to you, you will be surprised how often that prayer will be answered.

There's promise in this story – great promise. In the midst of, or in the aftermath of defeat and despair, of suffering and pain and confusion, there is always the friend who joins us. We can count on it if we will listen, reflect on His Word, spend time with friends who believe in Him and who share our commitment. Jesus will make himself known – perhaps in the breaking of bread – in our worship, in our private prayer time, kneeling to be ordained, in our deliberate conversations with other Christians – in our solitude – in the sudden visible transformation of a person whom you would never imagined would be changed.. No matter what turn or twist your walk is taking you, He will come. Stay alert. Keep your eyes open ...or be ready in case they are opened for you.

Notice that none of Jesus' post resurrection appearances take place in a place of worship. Jesus met Cleopas and company on the road. Jesus met the disciples in the upper room. Jesus met the disciples on the beach. Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus. We need to take our faith on the road....

Yesterday I took a trip on the road to Jason's Deli. I saw on my Next Door App that Baytown has a Chess Club that meets every Saturday from 3-6 at Jason's

Deli. I got to meet 4 new friends and lose 6 games. One of my new friends recognized me because his children had come to our Vacation Bible School. He outed me as a pastor, which opened my next opponent to share that he too is a pastor. He beat me twice.

At the end of our gospel story Cleopas and his friend do what is only natural. They get up and get on the road again to return to Jerusalem and tell the disciples whom they have seen. That's being a witness, telling your friends what you have seen. The Holy Spirit has the power to do the rest. The same Holy Spirit who was the power behind the witness of the disciples, was the power behind these two disciples that almost got awayand is with us.

On your road home, don't miss the power of the resurrection to transform and to make you into one of His witnesses. Make yourself available to be used by God. After all, that's what witnesses are, people who can't keep their mouths shut because they've had an eye-opening experience of Christ that moves them to take their story on the road....again....and again....and again.

Let's Pray. Dear Lord, walk with us. Walk with us from here to home, from home to work, school, the store, the club. Walk with us and reveal yourself to us...in the breaking of the bread, in the sharing of a meal around a table, in the beauty of worship, in the day to day and night to night walks of our lives. Open our eyes to see you in the face of our brothers and sisters. Open our hands to reach out to them in compassion. As we lift our hands in praise to you give us we pray, the strength and power to be your disciples in the world.

Blue Angel prayer: after Debbye's Waller's presentation on Court Appointed Special Advocates. (C.A.S.A.)

Lord we thank you for C.A.S.A. We thank for those, like Debbye who have answered the call to walk alongside children who are in distress. We pray for the children who have been impacted by adults that have brought them harm. We pray for the children that need someone to help them feel safe, to support them when they are taken to court, to have an adult who will speak up for their best interest. We pray your blessing on the CASA volunteers, the children they support and the courts that seek to provide help and safety for them.