

People of the Path

Luke 24:13-35

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*A path is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. ... A road, on the other hand, even the most primitive road, embodies a resistance against the landscape.*

-Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill"

When I was a boy, there was a big oak tree beside the road between Abilene and Stamford. In a world of scrub brush and shin-sized oaks, mesquite bushes and prickly pear cactus, a large oak tree was something of significance. The road went around it, making a slight bend in an otherwise straight line, therefore, lending even more significance to it. We did not know its significance, but my brother and I speculated on it endlessly as our family passed it time and time again over the years. Was it a hanging tree? Was it a hiding place for a cowboy while a band of Comanches rode by? Was it a meeting place for outlaws or a landmark for a rancher?

By the time I was a teenager, the road had been "improved" and expanded into a four-lane highway with the grand old oak standing in the middle of the northbound lanes on one side and the southbound on the other. Eventually, I think while I was in college, a speeding drunk driver hit the tree, destroying it, destroying his car, while he received some scratches. To this day, I can tell you exactly where that old tree stood whenever we drive by the spot.

Looking back, I wonder about the road going around a tree instead of removing the tree. If it had been an interstate highway, the tree would have been cut down so the straight line could continue unhindered, but there would have been no speculation about an old tree by West Texas travelers. There would have been no imaginative storytelling by little boys. Somewhere, sometime many years before someone in the highway dept. or someone working for the county, decided to respect that local source of wonderment, and build the road around the tree instead of over it. It makes me wonder.

Back in the 1969, Wendell Berry reflected on the difference between a path and a road:

*A path is ... not destructive. It is the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity, of movement to place; it obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets it goes around. A road, on the other hand, even the most primitive road, embodies a resistance against the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity for movement, but haste. Its wish is to avoid contact with the landscape; it seeks so far as possible to go over the country, rather than through it... (from "A Native Hill").*

In Berry's 1988 novel, *Remembering*, farmer Andy Catlett is returning home after being away, having flown into the Louisville airport, he gets into his old pickup, and drives up I-71. Wendell writes, *The eight lanes of the interstate become six and then four. The traffic thins. The city is behind him now, except for the road itself that is the city's hardened effluent, passing through its long gouge without respect for what was there before it or for what is now alongside it. The road reminds him, as it always has before, of the power of words far removed for what they are about. For the road is a word, conceived elsewhere and laid across*

*the country in the wound prepared for it: a word made concrete and thrust among us (Remembering, p. 115).*

Luke tells us this morning of the Word – not the word made concrete and thrust among us – but the resurrected Word made flesh and living among us. And it happens on a road. A path really.

I love this story of the Emmaus Road as it is usually known. It has long been one of my favorites. On Easter Sunday late afternoon, two disciples we have not met previously, are trudging home to their small village of Emmaus about 7 miles from Jerusalem. Part of why I like this story is that it is a simple reminder that though they have been up to Jerusalem and have heard the astounding news of Jesus' resurrection, they still must get home by the end of the day. Maybe they have family they need to see or fix supper for. Maybe there are animals to be tended, cows to be milked, chickens to be cooped-up? While the greatest cosmic event of all history has occurred that morning – the resurrection – the mundane chores of the homeplace must be tended. The children must be put to bed and the dishes must be washed.

And here's the thing: the resurrected Jesus appears right in the middle of it all. Yes, on Easter Sunday, the first day of the New Creation, in the resurrection of Christ God shatters the chains of evil. The Powers of Sin and Death do their very best to destroy God's-goodness-in-the-flesh on the cross, but God in Christ absorbs the worst that Sin and Death can do, overcomes it, and is resurrected as the inauguration of the God's New Creation, when in Christ, the entire universe starts anew, and healing and hope, justice and peace starts breaking into this old creation. Grace begins overcoming Disgrace.

And this astounding event-in-human-flesh comes to this road in a small dusty town with a single flashing yellow light, some boarded up buildings and a convenience store gas-station on the corner, among two disciples trying to get home in time to feed the dogs and get supper ready for the kids.

I remember back in the fall of 1980, one of my professors in the religion dept. at Baylor asked me if I'd be interested in driving out to a small country church that upcoming Sunday to preach. They were looking for a pastor and if I went out there, it would mean that I was open to being considered. He gave me directions to the church, and early that Sunday morning I drove down the interstate until I exited onto a state highway driving quite a way, and then turned onto a Farm to Market road for a while, before turning onto a county road – a paved path really, and finally up a hill on a dirt drive to the church. There it stood, a small, simple, plain little church building. It looked forlorn to me. Forgotten and overlooked.

A few weeks before I had preached in a thriving brick church just off the interstate not a fifteen-minute drive from Waco. They too were looking for a pastor but decided to keep looking. The report was that they liked my preaching, but I was too young, and I was unmarried. Well, I couldn't do anything about getting married, but I grew a mustache and since I was wearing contact lens, I bought a pair of intellectual looking eyeglasses with plain glass in them that I would reach into my coat pocket and put on when reading Scripture. All in the hope of looking older.

I suppose it all worked, because a week later that little congregation way off the beaten path voted to call me as pastor 12 to 1.

The brick church just off the interstate was somewhere. And now, I was the pastor of a little church in the middle of nowhere.

Which is exactly where the Living Christ shows up.

These two disciples are walking home along a little, dusty road – or for our purposes this morning – a path. Even today the road from Jerusalem is not much. It's paved and well-tended, mostly because of the tourist buses and pilgrims coming to visit the little church in modern Emmaus, but it is still a small road to a small village.

In the first century, it was more likely a path. The word we translate as “road” can also be translated as “way” or “path.” There was a more impressive, well-built Roman road coming into Jerusalem from Caesarea Maritima, the Roman city on the coast that was the headquarters for the governor, Pontus Pilate, and the Roman military, the elite Italian Cohort (see Acts 10:1). Rome built their famous highways so they could move imperial troops quickly and efficiently to anyplace in the empire that needed Roman order, and at the same time, so Roman taxes could be extracted quickly and efficiently to Rome.

In contrast, the road to Emmaus was a peasant road. Little more than a trail formed by poor, working people getting back and forth to jobs in Jerusalem, or maybe working in the nearby fields. While the Roman Imperial roads, or what we might call highways, like the Empire itself plowed through and over anything in the way, the peasant paths went along with the contours of the land, alongside the creeks, around the big old tree, skirting the edge of the hill.

I bet you never thought of roads and highways making political statements, but they do. Empires build highways, interstates, and autobahns. Peasants and poor people, small towns and villages have paths and trails. Empires impose and intrude, while small towns and villages cooperate and work alongside.

As these two disciples are walking home, a stranger comes up and joins them on the journey – the Word made flesh living with us – even though they don't yet know it. He asks, "What are you fellows talking about?" And they stop dead in their tracks in shock, "What?! You must be the only person from Jerusalem who has not heard what has been happening over the last few days." The Living Jesus responds, "What things? What are you talking about?"

They reply excitedly, "Man oh man, have we got a lot to tell you. Jesus of Nazareth, a great prophet of God in word and deed, was handed over by the religious authorities and was tortured and lynched. We had hoped he was the One who was going to set us all free. And even though all that happened three days ago, we heard from some women in our group this morning that he was alive. Some of others of our group went to the tomb to check it out, and though they did not see him, they said the tomb was indeed empty."

And in the original "come to Jesus" meeting, Jesus responds, "What's the matter with you?! You're dim-witted and small-hearted! Why don't you believe the Bible and what the prophets said?! This is exactly what was foretold would happen to the Messiah, the One." Then, for the rest of the walk home, Jesus explained Scripture to them about himself.

Later, looking back, these disciples realize the Resurrected Christ, the Bright and Morning Star, the Alpha and the Omega, was with them right there on that little dusty path. They exclaim to one another, "Wow! We did not recognize him even though our hearts were burning within us while he was talking with us on the road, while he was teaching the Scriptures to us" (v. 32). At the end of this story when they run the seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell the rest of the disciples, they say, "The Lord is risen indeed!" and Luke adds that they told what had

happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread” (v.35).

The early church would have looked at one another and smiled and nodded when they heard this story from Luke. They knew about knowing the Living Christ on the road. This kind of thing apparently happened so often, in one way or another, that the “road” or “way” or “path” became a metaphor of the whole Christian life. The Living Christ was known on the Way. Not tied down, not the distant Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, not the implacable unchanging God of Fundamentalism, and not the abstract, gnostic sacred flow of some kind of generalized spirituality of progressives.

Luke tells us that the God of the universe is known to us in the Living Christ right where we live and walk. Locally. As we participate in mission, get up from the couch, come out of our comfort zones, and join others on the journey of following the Living Christ in service, justice, healing, and peacemaking, we will begin to recognize him on the Way.

Indeed, in the book of Acts, the earliest designation for the church was “people of the Way” or we might translate it as, “people of the path” (see Acts 9:2).

I remember years ago, in the early 90’s, when Austin Heights had the first prayer service called, “A Service of Hope for Those Whose Lives Have Been Touched by HIV/AIDS.” This sacred place was filled with gay men, and parents of gay men, and various families who had somehow been affected by HIV/AIDS. From all over people came to pray and hear a word of hope and comfort.

A month or so afterwards, Dwayne Key from our church was on the way home from SFA, when he saw a young family pulled over on the side of the road on a hot afternoon. The young man was pushing the car while inside in the sweltering heat was a young woman and baby. Dwayne pulled over and offered to help. They were out of gas, so Dwayne loaded them all up in his pickup where there was air-conditioning, and they went to get gas. When they came back to the car to put gas in it, the young couple thanked Dwayne for the help and the young mother said, "I recognize you. Aren't you from the church that had the AIDS prayer service? Our baby is HIV+ from a blood transfusion I received during pregnancy, and we were there."

On the Way, on the Path, we will come to know the Living One.

The testimony of those disciples was that the Resurrected Christ walked with them on the road but also "in the breaking of the bread." Those early hearers of this story would have smiled at this, as well. They knew. They knew that Jesus, the Living Word, had taught those two disciples on the road about the Bible, the written word, and preached a sermon. And they knew that in the Holy Communion of the Lord's Supper that they recognized the Living Jesus right there beside them.

Very early in our AIDS ministry, around 1991 or so, I remember going to visit a young man who was dying from AIDS. He was the first full-blown AIDS patient I visited in his home, and in his case, it was a trailer out somewhere in the woods, down a barely paved county road, and then off on a sandy path. His partner was waiting anxiously for me and took me inside where the young man was in bed, feeble, and barely able to talk.

Out of the clear blue, I asked him, "Would you like something to drink or eat?" His partner said there was a Coke in the refrigerator, and I spontaneously



asked for crackers or a piece of bread. I asked and the partner said that “Yes, he is able to eat as long as it is small amounts.” They had a loaf of Mrs. Baird’s light bread in the cabinet, and I took one slice, and poured three glasses of Coca-Cola and distributed them among us. I broke one small piece of bread for the young man in the bed and placed it on his tongue, “This is the Body of Christ broken for you,” I said as he and his partner cried, and we all ate pieces of light bread. Then we each sipped some Coca-Cola, “this is the Blood of Christ poured out for you.”

There in a trailer in the woods on a sandy path, two gay men, one of them dying, and I shared the Feast of Life of Coca-Cola and Mrs. Baird’s light bread, and we prayed in the hope of the resurrection Christ gives us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.