

Eyes Wide Open, or The Power of the Testimony

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Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, April 6, 2008; Bryn Mawr, PA

Luke 24:13-35

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...”

Movement 1 – Leaving a Difficult Time

The two disciples were on the road. They were on the road, going to a different place, a place that was not Jerusalem. They were on the road looking for a different life, a new life. The two disciples were on the road. They were leaving a difficult time; they were leaving a challenging time and a traumatic time. They were on a journey; they were trying to move on, to find a new life. They were on the road.

It is almost impossible to use such a term without mentioning the classic Beat text *On the Road*. Perhaps you can imagine the disciples carrying a copy of Jack Kerouac’s classic work as they went out on their journey. Maybe they were looking for something different just as the main character Sal Paradise was looking for something different. Maybe they were looking for the kind of life and excitement that Sal Paradise found as he journeyed from city to city across the American landscape. There have been a number of interpretations of Sal Paradise’s journey to New York, across the Midwest, towards a village of migrant workers, to the South, and back again. There are a number of metaphors, symbolisms and allusions that one can draw from this classic text. One thing we can say with certainty is that a bulk of the book has Sal Paradise either leaving or arriving or in transit. Sal Paradise is on a journey, leaving something and trying to find something. Perhaps it was a journey towards hope, towards life itself, and away from the mundane, the constricting and material expectations that are often placed on the individual. He was going somewhere, just as the disciples were going somewhere.

When we think about it, a majority of our own life is a journey. We are leaving something and headed towards something. We may be literally leaving a home, a town, school or work. We may be literally headed towards something, a new job, a new home, a new town, or a new school. We may find ourselves literally on a journey or on a more figurative journey. Yet I believe we are also on a spiritual journey. Lawrence Cunningham talks about the power of the journey found in the ancient Christian pilgrimages. The power of the pilgrimage is not just in the destination but in the process to get there (*Catholic Heritage*). Read Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and you will capture a bit of the power of the journey itself that is found in the pilgrimage. In the pilgrimage one is headed towards something holy and leaving something secular.

Perhaps we are on a spiritual journey, or perhaps it is just the basic journey one finds oneself through life trying to make it from this day to the next day, trying to survive. Today I am inviting you to consider walking on the road to Emmaus with the disciples. I am inviting you to look at your life, to consider where you are in your life and if you find yourself walking on the road with the disciples. Are you on a journey, on the road, headed somewhere and leaving something? Are you on the road, on a journey to Emmaus?

Movement 2 – The Hardships Behind Us

The disciples are leaving something. They are leaving a tragic situation, a difficult situation of which they no longer wanted to belong. Behind them was Jerusalem, with the sadness still in the air, with many crosses still standing, holding up bodies of former revolutionaries, criminals, and people of misfortune. Behind them was Jerusalem, with the sorrow of their lost hope lingering in the air reminding all of the disappointment and struggles that they still had to endure. The two disciples were on the road, heading away from Jerusalem. They were on the road to what they would hope would be a better time and a better place, trying to escape the tragedy of the morning, the tragedy of the past, the tragedy that was behind them.

Behind them the smoke still rises. Behind them is the despair. The disciples left sorrow and tragedy and yet they still carried it in their hearts. Remember that this is still the Sunday after the crucifixion, and they were not sure how to take things. They still saw in their mind's eye the loss of the cross. They still saw the hopelessness of the crucifixion. Just a few days ago, they saw their Lord arrested, and condemned. As they walked with this ignorant stranger, (who happened to be Jesus) they shared the events of the past days, and in doing so opened up again the wounds of their hearts. The wounds of hope lost in what they saw in Christ. They saw a prophet, a mighty prophet in word and deed who was condemned by their chief priests and handed over to be hung on the cross. They saw the possibility for a life free of oppression from the Romans. They saw Israel restored and brought to a new, higher and different place through Christ. Yet in their minds, in their hearts Christ was dead and hope was lost. Even with the amazing story of the women at the tomb, the sorrow still hung with the image of Christ on the cross. Robert Tanninhill describes the experience of the disciples as a past hope lost. This is the tragedy that the disciples wanted to leave.

What is it that we are leaving? What is it that sends us to walk with the disciples towards a different place, towards Emmaus? What hope has been lost in our lives? Is it the constant bickering between you and your spouse, or even worse the space of the silence that reminds you of a relationship now lost? What is it that you are leaving? Is it the demands of a job that offers little to no return of a sense of self and assurance. A job that belittles you and offers little satisfaction? A dream of being someone is now lost. What is it that you are leaving? Is it the demands of school, demands that seem to be overwhelming, paralyzing and constricting and you do not know why you continue and towards what end? What is it that you are leaving?

I wonder about Sara and Abraham. They were on a journey that was started with faith. Abraham heard from God, received a promise from God that he would receive a home land, and be the father of multitudes. Yet in Genesis 15, he has been wandering with seemingly no focus or direction. Abraham is getting old, as is his wife. Maybe the journey changed to focus on leaving the hope and the promise they had received from God. Maybe they have lost hope in God's promise. Maybe they could no longer imagine the promise of descendants and now they live in a nomadic life based on a foolish hope and a wisp of a dream. Maybe they were leaving a lost hope.

We want to leave because we see it as a place that is void of hope. We want to escape because we cannot see any chance of change for the good. The disciples saw the crucifixion as a tragedy and only a tragedy. They could not see any hope in the events that transpired. They looked at the darkness and could not see any light.

Is that not what we see as well? Is that not why we want to leave, because of the lack of hope? When you actually stand in the reality of your life, and you hold in your hands the despair, the anguish and the hurt that you experience through your family, your work, your health where can you see hope? We need escape.

Hell is often described as a place where God is not. How often do you hear someone describe their life as a living hell? How often have you experienced your pain as a literal hell? It is so desperate, so despairing that it feels as if God is absent. This is the depth of the darkness of the crucifixion, that God dies and we are left on our own. Where is God when our parent died? Where is God when our child suffers? Where is God when we worry about our safety for tomorrow? Drowned in our disappointment, hurting and crying we leave a place where we cannot find God.

We all have darkness, a horror, and a crucifixion behind us, around us, before us that we want to leave. It is something that we want to leave. What is it that you are leaving? What is it that you wish to leave behind as you journey with the disciples? What are you leaving?

Movement 3 – The Depth of the Darkness

Where are we going? Where are we going as we journey with the disciples away from the despair of Jerusalem? Where are we headed as we try to escape our hopelessness?

Scholars have speculated and searched in effort to discover the location of the mysterious “Emmaus.” To date we cannot say with certainty where Emmaus is located. To date we do not even know if such a town existed. Yet these disciples were headed somewhere, and perhaps it is not so much the geographical location as it is the idea and the focus of the journey. They were trying to escape, to run away to something better and different. The disciples were going to what they hoped would be a safer, better place. The disciples were trying to find a place of escape and sanctuary. That reality is that the disciples were just trying to run away to something better.

We have been there as well. We have found ourselves on the road, running away. We have found ourselves running to something or someone that can give us a sense of peace and rest. What is that place?

So often destructive behavior comes out of our search for Emmaus. So often destructive behavior comes out of our attempts to leave what we may see as a hopeless situation. We journey to that next drink, to an evening of mindless television, to hanging out with friends, to pouring ourselves into a book, going for a long drive, and on and on. We all have our Emmaus, our place of safety and security that we go to so that we can escape and be safe, if only for a moment. We can find ourselves walking with the disciples not wanting to look back at the difficult work environment, not wanting to look back at the difficult home environment, and not wanting to look at the difficult relationship we find ourselves in.

Fredric Beuchner once wrote:

“...the place we go to in order to escape—a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, ‘let the whole damn thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.’...Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car...Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that

[people] have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice—have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.” (Beuchner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 85-86)

I knew someone who lived in a horrible situation. She did not take care of herself or her living environment. Her apartment was a toxic disaster, a superfund site, a dumping ground for everything and anything that came within 20 feet of this woman. Her health was spiraling downward, her family relations were strained at best and her finances were close to nothing. Things were not going well for her. Yet every time I would visit she would be working on a puzzle. Every time I visited all she talked about was the puzzle. That was all that she focused on and centered on. The puzzle was her escape, her sanctuary. The puzzle was her Emmaus.

We all find ourselves leaving a difficult time, a difficult town and journeying with the disciples towards Emmaus. We all find ourselves looking for something where we can escape and find peace and hope and rest. We all journey on that road to Emmaus.

Movement 4 – Opening Up

Yet Christ opens our eyes. He appears on the road with the disciples, and they do not recognize him. He walks with them and talks to them. He asks them, why so sad. He wonders why they are so forlorn, so despondent and in such despair. He pushes at their place of anguish, asking them to revisit their own tears and the disciples respond. The disciples respond regardless of the incredulous nature of the question with the full story. They revisit the wound; they share their grief with Christ and tell him of their own despair.

Imagine this as a prayer. Imagine you are in the midst of your prayer, and you are asking God for some grace. You are running away from your grief, and looking to God for help. You close your eyes; you bow your head, and look to go to your happy place. You want to go to your comfortable place, the place of safety and security, and in your prayer you hear from God, “why? What is it that you are leaving? Why is it that you are so urgent to rush off and leave? Why are you so anxious to go?”

When a friend asks such a question we can smile and say, “No reason.” When a family member asks such a question we can say everything is fine. Yet when God asks such a question, we may first be caught by the question itself. Shouldn’t God know? Shouldn’t God know what you have been struggling with and why you are so forlorn? Is the Lord so distant from you that you have to explain your reasons and your rationale for your mental and spiritual escape? The question is incredulous. “Are you the only one who does not know what is happening in my Jerusalem?”

You start to answer the question and realize that depth of the difficulty of the interrogative. To tell God is to open the wound. To share with God (and you know that you cannot brush over things with the Lord) you have to be fully honest with your lost hope, your despair and your disappointment. It is a high task that God is asking you to do, that Christ is asking the disciples to do on the road to Emmaus.

Yet it is an important task. It is important to be honest with the Lord. It is important to bring the Lord into your suffering and your despair. It is important to share your wounds with the Lord. Only when you are honest with God can God fully and completely address your wounds. Only when you share your own hurts can God then address them. For the Lord will walk with you, the Lord will listen to you, and then, in a

moment, in a moment of grace and power, the Lord will explain the depth of the divine presence. In a moment the Lord will open your eyes. The Lord will open your eyes to things that you may not or cannot see through your tears. The Lord will open your eyes to things that you may not understand through your anxiety and despair. The Lord will open your eyes.

Jesus walked with the disciples, and after he heard about their despair, he opened their eyes. He opened their eyes to the scriptures and the ways scriptures were being lived through his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus opened the disciples' eyes to the teachings. He opened the disciples' eyes to the guiding hand of God, to the presence of God, and to the eternal hope that was still sustained by God.

It may be through a sermon, through a devotional, through a time of prayer, but the hope of Christ will break through your despair and open your eyes to life. Read the gospel stories, the story of the church in Acts and the pastoral epistles and you will have hope. The hope that there is life through Christ. The hope that the despair which the disciples were experiencing was not the final mark. Christ showed where hope could be found in such a dark and despairing place. Christ showed hope.

Christ walks with you in your journey and opens your eyes to the hope and the promise that is offered to you. Christ opens our eyes to hope.

Movement 5 – The Table

We then find ourselves at the table. Walking with Jesus, the disciples did not want to leave his side so quickly. Walking with Jesus, the disciples found comfort in his words and his teachings and did not want to leave his side. So they urged him to stay, to eat and continue the conversation. Before they knew what was happening, they found themselves at the table with Christ, and witnessed something they have seen before. They witnessed Christ taking bread, blessing it and breaking it before them. Immediately their minds returned to the moment when Christ fed the five thousand. Their minds returned to the moment when Christ took bread, blessed it and broke it and passed it out amongst the multitudes, his divinity shining through. Their minds returned to the moment in the upper room when Christ took bread, blessed it and gave thanks and passed it amongst them at their last supper. They remembered the power of the moment and the grace that showered upon them in that moment. They remembered as they watched Christ take bread, bless it and break it. Their eyes were opened. Their hearts were opened at the table.

Perhaps in the midst of our journey, at the height of our journey we find ourselves at the table. It may be a meandering journey, similar to the wondering through the wilderness. It may be a journey that we have traveled blindly, with our eyes shut to the presence of the Lord, walking gingerly and carefully. It may have been a journey moving towards our Emmaus and back towards our wounds and back again towards our Emmaus. Yet in the midst of that journey, Christ is revealed to us. In the midst of that journey, the presence of God is shown to us. We are shown that even in the darkest days we were not alone and not without hope. We are shown that even in the most hopeless days we were not completely lost, but God was with us. And as we see glimmers of hope and glimmers of light, we eventually find ourselves at the table. We find ourselves at that holy and powerful table with our Lord. Maybe our eyes are still closed. Maybe our hope is still stayed until that powerful moment, that returning ritual when Christ takes the bread and blesses it and gives thanks. In a flash, in a moment our eyes our opened, our hope is

renewed and we remember. John Calvin talks about the mnemonic power of the table, the power to call us to remember the Last Supper as if we were there and because we have been there and we are there. The power of the ritual evokes our memory to the person of Jesus Christ and the power of his revelation. Yet it goes beyond that. Our memory does not stop there, but moves to those moments of greatest despair and hopelessness. Before we could only remember darkly, but now we can remember with a great light, a light that has shined through Jesus Christ. Before we could only remember the pain, but now we can also remember the hope.

I am sure you have read the story of the footprints. It has become a trite kind of cliché in Christian sentimentalism. Yet at the same time it is a story that holds power. For that moment when the author looks back he only remembers walking alone, in the hopeless situation. Yet after encountering God he remembers differently, he remembers it as a time when God was indeed carrying him. We remember the hope of Christ even in the depth of the despair of the crucifixion.

Sarah and Abraham were reminded of God's presence with their visitors and reminded of God's presence. God never has left them and never will leave them, their eyes only needed to be opened to the Lord.

The disciples were reminded of the mission and the ministry of Christ. They were reminded of the promise of the Messiah, and reminded that even in the darkest moment, the moment of hope lost; God has not left them and would not leave them.

We find ourselves in moments of despair when we feel that all is lost and we are ready to give up and run to our Emmaus. Yet in a moment, Christ opens our eyes and reminds us that we are not alone and never have been alone. Christ has not left us and will not leave us. At the table the profound power of this revelation is brought into its fullness. At the table our eyes were opened and we see Jesus.

Movement 6 – Return

Run back to Jerusalem. Run back to the very place of despair. Run back to the very place where you thought hope was lost. Run back to Jerusalem and tell people that you have seen the Lord, that hope is not lost. Run and share with your eyes now opened. The disciples finally acknowledged the burning they felt on their hearts, the hope and promise from the Lord and they ran to tell. Run and share. They shared their new perspective of the cross. They shared their new hope in the Messiah. They shared their new belief in the risen Lord. Run and share.

Run and share how even in the darkest night you still found hope in the Lord. Run and share how even in the deepest despair you were still with the Lord, even if you were not aware of it. Run and share. Run to that family in despair, still living in yesterday's Jerusalem. Run to your friends struggling, still weeping at the cross. Run to your family member who is hurting at the tomb of Christ. Run and share.

Run and share your testimony. A testimony is telling of a hope lost and a hope once again found. Share your testimony of how you saw Christ at the table, and how he was with you for so long. Share your struggles, your fears, and the final victory in Christ. Share your new vision and your new sight. Run and share that Christ has come to you, has been revealed to you and hope reigns. For there are others who do not yet see, tell them to open their eyes. There are others who do not yet understand the ever present Lord. There are others who look at the cross and only see death. Tell them of the life you

see and the hope you have claimed. Tell them of the glory of Christ. With your eyes wide opened, run and give a testimony, run and share about Christ.
AMEN