

**The sermon preached on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020 based upon Luke 24:13 – 35 entitled, “Coming to Understand the Stories of Our Lives through the Light of the One Who Walks Beside Us.”**

The four Gospels all tell the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection – but of all the Gospel writers, Luke is far and away the best story teller. He alone tells the enchanting Christmas story that is embedded in our hearts – of how Joseph and Mary made the long, grueling trek to Bethlehem in the late stage of Mary’s pregnancy. It is only in Luke’s Gospel that we hear what are surely the two best known parables, both also involving trips: the one about the Samaritan who comes upon a beaten man at the side of the road and choosing to help him, and the one about the two brothers – the one who makes what seems like the very bad decision to take his father’s inheritance early and travel to a far country where he makes some very poor choices, while the other who never leaves home.

Luke’s travel stories remind us that life itself is a kind of a trip – a spiritual journey of our souls – regardless of whether this journey takes us far from home geographically or we spend all our days never really leaving the place we are born. We listen to these stories two thousand years later because they contain wisdom and direction as we seek to make our ways forward on our journeys.

Luke knows how to tell a story in a way that will stick with us, and this morning we have a story he told of an appearance of Jesus after his resurrection that is of all such stories found in the Bible the most lovingly told, with a particular ability to capture our imagination. Interestingly enough, this story also involves travel – a tale of two disheartened, grief stricken disciples making their way down a dusty road.

In the story told immediately before what I am about to read, we hear of the women who came to the tomb early Easter morning where to their great surprise they found the tomb empty and two angels that I imagine as balls of light who announced to them that Jesus was alive. The women run back to the male disciples to tell them what they have experienced, but Luke tells us, they largely discount what they say – considering it merely the “idle talk” of women. We pick up the story in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> verse.

***Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’***

In all good stories, there are questions that arise, some which get answered, and others that don't but invite our imagination to ponder what is happening in the story.

The first question in this case is why are these two disciples making this journey to this obscure town of Emmaus? We aren't told, but we can conjecture that they are simply trying to get away – to put distance between themselves and the place where their hearts were broken.

And then the second question, one that doesn't ever receive a clear answer: Why don't the disciples recognize Jesus when he comes to walk beside them?

In keeping with our theme of “story telling”, it is striking to note that at the outset the two disciples are discussing their own “story” – the events that have recently transpired in the time they spent in Jerusalem. A stranger comes along beside them – a stranger Luke tells us is actually an unrecognized Jesus, a fact that heightens the suspense of the story. Will they recognize him?

The stranger inquires what they are talking about and to their surprise feigns ignorance about the recent events that have gripped the public conversation of Jerusalem. He invites them to tell him their story

And so to simply take note: Jesus values the story of what they have experienced and the importance of their telling it. He listens without interrupting them.

All of us have stories to tell – the story of the journey our life has taken us on from the when we were in our mother's womb to the present day – a story that inevitably mixes the good with the bad, the happy with the sad. These stories are important because they shape the person we are today. As I have often noted, when I give eulogies at memorial services and people invariably say, “There was so much I didn't know about the life story of this person I loved.”

We don't tell each other our stories perhaps because we don't think our stories aren't worth listening to or perhaps because there are parts of the stories we would rather not remember, and prefer others not know – stories that express emotions we would prefer to keep buried. We also don't tell our stories because no one seems to have the time or interest to listen.

So Jesus asks them to tell their stories, and listens intently as they ramble on for quite a while.

***They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. 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. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'***

So Jesus patiently listens without interrupting as they tell their story as they understand it – a story of hopes raised and then hopes dashed, and the strangeness of the women's testimony.

It is important for us to reflect on the stories that have shaped us, and tell these stories to others.

But one thing to notice here is that the stories we tell are always incomplete. There are things we leave out – memories we distort. The way we tell our stories includes our interpretation of what has taken place in the course of their lives, and invariably our interpretations fail to grasp the deeper meanings of our lives.

Only God knows our stories in their totality and truth.

And so after the two disciples have finished talking, Jesus proceeds to challenge the stories they have told – to point out things they have overlooked in their telling of the story – what they've left out. In particular, how they have missed the bigger picture or context of their stories -- how God has been working throughout human history to bring healing to a broken creation, and how that larger story interprets what they have recently experienced.

**Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.**

**As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.**

What a fascinating detail in the story Luke tells! The outcome of the story is not set in stone. The mysterious stranger – Jesus – does not force himself upon the two men. They've arrived at their destination for the night, but he appears intent to continue on down the road.

There is a choice the two men must make – and, as they say, to fail to choose is nonetheless to choose.

They can bid the stranger farewell, perhaps thank him for an interesting, thought-provoking conversation, and let it go at that. Or they can invite him into the house in which they are staying.

A good story is one in which the outcome is not evident from the outset. There are choices made in freedom by the character that will determine how the plot evolves.

**But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.**

*The two men allow themselves to feel compassion for the stranger walking on into the darkness of the night. They choose to offer hospitality to the stranger, and this simple choice make all the difference in the world.*

**When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'**

*And once more, they engage in story telling...*

**Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.**

So allow me to make some observations arising from this beautifully told ancient story of our faith.

First, telling and reflecting on our personal stories can be healing and perhaps those of us who are finding ourselves with extra time on our hands in this epidemic can take the opportunity to do so. Honestly telling our stories – particularly the difficult parts -- can be cathartic, releasing pent up emotions that have hindered our inner freedom. Finding someone to listen as we tell our stories – a loving, trusted friend or a wise counselor – can be particularly helpful.

As such a person listens, perhaps the Spirit will move at certain points inspiring them to point out parts of your story you have missed, overlooked, or avoided. Perhaps in our story telling we have a tendency to portray ourselves as the helpless victim who others have consistently dumped upon. Or perhaps the tale we tell portrays ourselves as unworthy of love, laying all blame regarding what has gone wrong squarely on our own shoulders.

In the story of the two brothers, at the end of the story the elder brother pouts, refusing to come into the party thrown for his long lost brother who has finally come home. His father comes out of the party to invite him to share in the celebration. He listens patiently as his elder son tells his story: *I always did what I was supposed to and you never threw a party for me!* In response, his father lovingly points out that all he had to do was ask and he also would have been given a party. The elder son chose not to ask, and now he is reveling in

the identity he has embraced of being the victim. Strikingly, the famous parable ends with the father's gracious invitation to his son hanging in the air. Will he, or won't he choose the way that leads to life? As we listen to the story, we are invited to continue the story with the choices we make in our lives moving forward.

Like the two disciples, all of us encounter moments in our lives of mysterious grace in which we are given veiled glimpses of the divine. We also are given a choice at such moments -- simply to press on with our business or to choose as best we can to invite what we have glimpsed more deeply into our lives.

What will we choose?

The younger brother in Jesus' parable comes to a point that might seem like the end of the story. In the far country where he is squandered his inheritance he plummets into despair as a result of the bad choices he has made. Fortunately, he recognizes that there is another decision he can make – to humble himself and return to his father's house where at the very least he can work as a hired hand. The choice to do so opens him up to an unimagined bounty of grace when his father welcomes him home with the party.

Someone near and dear to me tells a story of a time in her life in which she found herself in a place resembling that the two disciples on that road to Emmaus, grief-stricken with much of the hope she had pinned her life on dashed. One night she had a vision of two circles of light that appeared in her bedroom with a simple two word message: "Try again." The story was not over. The story goes on with the unseen presence of the Risen One drawing her forward.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Now I know in part, then I shall now fully, even as I am fully known."

God alone fully knows and understands the meaning of our stories. When we breath our last breath, we will come into the presence of God, the one who knows us completely and loves us unconditionally. In the presence of God thee complete story of our lives on earth will be reviewed. We will see the truth of the ways in which the choices we made impacted others and ourselves. We will experience the blessing we were for others at certain points, and we will experience the pain we caused people at others points. We will see the way in which at the deepest level our stories are all woven together and that God has always been at work behind the scenes seeking to move us in the direction of a deeper love and wholeness.

In the meantime, let us seek with the aid of these ancient stories to understand our stories better. Let us recognize the choices that ours to make that can lead us more deeply into the way of Jesus.