

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 7.1.2018



## Spiritual Geography: On the Road

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Luke 24:13-35

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 in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” 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.”

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 he came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is not nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. 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!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Continuing in our sermon series on spiritual geography, today we hear the familiar story of two of the disciples walking along the road to Emmaus where they encounter the risen Christ. Listen with me for God’s word to us today.

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Many Americans have a love-affair with the road.

Whether it is Jack Kerouac chronicling he and his fellow Beat poets in their cross-country adventures through his critically acclaimed novel, *On the Road*; Jake and Ellwood from the *Blue Brothers* (“There are 106 miles to Chicago. We have a full tank of gas, half a pack of smokes, it’s dark, and we’re wearing sunglasses. Hit it!”), or the beloved and awkward Uncle Eddie from National Lampoon’s *Vacation* (“That there Clark is an RV. Don’t you go falling in love with it, because we’re taking it when we leave next month.”) – in our national lexicon there are plenty of examples of how we have romanticized a good-old-fashioned American road trip.

Did you know there is even a cookbook with recipes engineered for cooking on your car’s engine? It’s true. The third edition of the *Manifold Destiny Cookbook* came out in 2008 and soon thereafter my brother-in-law cooked a pork tenderloin to perfection on the engine block of his Buick Park Avenue during a road trip from Seattle to Kansas City.

In our upcoming issue of *Tapestry* – the magazine the church puts out quarterly – there is an article about Grace Barud – one of our college students – who is currently in the midst of a most epic road trip, spending her summer running 4,000 miles from San Francisco to New York City to raise money and awareness for young adults with cancer.

As she pounds the pavement this July 4<sup>th</sup>, I can imagine Grace signing that great American anthem, *From California to the New York island – this land was made for you and me...*

In the American imagination, we tend to equate a road trip with an opportunity for discovery and adventure. Many times, road trips mark a rite of passage: a road trip to visit colleges, a road trip to cement a relationship with a good group of friends, a road trip to celebrate the freedom of retirement.



Roll down the windows, crank up the radio, set off on the journey...

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There are other times, though, when we hit the road because we just need to get away.

That's what Cleopas and the other disciple were doing when they decided to take a road trip from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. In fact, scholars aren't sure there really was a village called Emmaus. They think this story might just be the gospel writer Luke's way of underlining the point that Cleopas and his friend were hitting the road to escape the disappointment and confusion of what had happened in Jerusalem.

Remember, they had come to Jerusalem with hope and expectation that things could be different – high on a promise that the world could change, that their lives could change. But after Jesus' arrest and crucifixion they left Jerusalem with the heavy realization that the world was still broken. That the powers of sin were just too strong – even for the one who said he was God's son.

As they walked along the road, they were focused on the problems that still plagued their lives and their world; so overwhelmed by them that they had to just get away. Luke tells us that they were talking. But I am willing to bet that there were long stretches of their road trip when they didn't share a word.

And I get that. I've been in that car before – in the quiet – mind racing – focused on problems – trying to put them in the rearview mirror – but feeling like I can't drive fast enough.

Sometimes, when all I have is open road and my own thoughts, I tend to think that the solution to the problems I face depends on me. It's somewhat of a downward spiral.

I can imagine that's what the journey was like for Cleopas and his friend.

They probably fed off of each other.

“We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel,” they said.

But now, here we are:

The government is still broken.

The peacemakers and the poor are still a long way from being blessed.

We've still got that desire to find meaning in our lives that we thought Jesus could satisfy...

...but he's gone.

And we're here.



So what are we supposed to do now?

It's a journey with which most of us are well acquainted, I suspect.

Affected by the heaviness of life – focused on the problems:

children and parents separated at the border,  
anger spilling over everywhere,  
the gears of government clogged with acrimony and distrust,  
violence visiting the workplace.

That's this week.

Then there are the problems that I know walk in and out of the doors of this room every Sunday:

financial strain,  
the pressure of taking care of both parents and your children,  
disease,  
depression,  
a loneliness won't go away – even though you are surrounded by friends and family.

We, too, had hoped that he would be the one who would redeem. But here we are...

On vacation last week, I came across an article that was written by a preacher named Sarah Condon, and it hit me like a 2x4 because she described a trap that I so often fall into as I think about the holy calling I have to proclaim a word to you from this pulpit.

So what I confess is that, sometimes, I misunderstand my role as your pastor and preacher to be one that offers you a word that will help you fix the problems we face in our world and in our lives. To take try to weave the latest headline – however subtly – into a sermon and put it in conversation God's word in Scripture...which is fine, and a good way to practice faith (as Karl Barth suggested – to have the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other). But then the trap is to believe that I can give you something to do to fix what ails us. Something to do more of, something to do less of.

Something you should do. Something we should do.

And then send you back out those doors to walk that road by yourself.

Sometimes I and other preachers do that well – other times we don't.

Regardless, telling you what you should do to fix yours and the world's problems isn't the gospel. It's self-help.



And it doesn't work.

Because what cures a broken world has got to be more than broken people trying harder.

It's got to be more than stretching ourselves farther and farther to respond to insatiable needs.

It's got to be more than a political party convincing 51% of the country that their ideas are the right ones.

It's got to be more than big personalities projecting their strength.

It's got to be more, even, than a nation putting itself first.

What we do matters – because God uses it.

But it doesn't save.

In this morning's story, Luke tells us that when the stranger met them on the road, Cleopas and his friend "stood still, looking sad."

I find that to be a simple, yet profoundly revealing description of what it feels like to think that we are the solution to the problems we face.

The good news is that Jesus meets us on the road – and reminds us that we don't walk alone.

The good news is that resurrection isn't just an idea – but that it is fountain of hope that springs forth in the broken places where we need it the most because that kind of hope is not something that human beings can manufacture...it is only something that we can receive.

Last night my family and I took a little road trip.

We drove uptown to attend a vigil at First Ward park – to pray for children who had been separated from their parents.

To be honest, I was a little ambivalent.

I was feeling that familiar tension between faithfulness and brokenness.

Wanting to voice support and pray for those suffering from separation.

Knowing, too, that issues of immigration are complex and without easy solutions.

As a father, wanting my children to know that they could participate in praying for others whose names they would never know.

As a pastor, knowing that not everyone in my congregation would be happy to know that their preacher was at a vigil that looked a lot like a protest.



There were many messages last night: speakers from the stage, signs that people were holding up. Some I agreed with, some that I thought went too far. I had a hard time hearing, though, because we were sitting by the splash park, where kids were laughing and shrieking and running through the water – some with bathing suits, others fully clothed, others in diapers and underwear. And they were brown, black, and white. They were from the United States, and Mexico, and Guatemala.

It was through their voices that Jesus spoke to me – right there in the park, when I was feeling like I was responsible for figuring out a solution to the problems of the world.

Through their sopping wet laughter, I heard the good news of the gospel: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God: and that is what we are.”

And as I looked at their faces – and thought about the love that Christ gave to claim each of them as his own children – I believed that to be true.

And that rekindled in me a hope – and that hope is what I want you to carry with you this week along the road.

