

March 20, 2022

Lent 3C

Covenant Part 2 - "...to walk in the ways of the Lord" - © Rev. Dr. Seth Jones

In the very early days of the faith, back when following Jesus was a sectarian breakaway movement within Judaism, the movement was known as "The Way". This is because Jesus' disciples had a habit of wandering from town to town. They were spiritual travelers and pilgrims, seeking others to join their wandering band of lovers of God. From the very beginning, Christianity was a way of walking in the world, a way of traveling in this material realm for the sake of spiritual enlightenment and understanding. Jesus understood better than most that travel and pilgrimage is not just a personal experience, but rather one that only has meaning when it is shared with others.

And so the disciples walked everywhere, going from town to town, country to country, village to village, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to whomsoever would listen. Christianity is a peripatetic faith, a wandering, walking faith. The more the disciples traveled, the more they understood that, as Peter discovered, "God shows no partiality". Mark Twain echoes a similar sentiment in *The Innocents Abroad*, when he says,

*"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."*

Thinking of our lives of faith as ways of travel in the landscape of faith means we need to consider the ways we choose to walk within that landscape. Joshua tells us that there are ways which follow the old gods of the local area, and there is the way of the Lord, which is a way of sincerity and faithfulness, a way of showing reverence for the things God has done for us. Joshua says, echoing Moses, here are all these pathways before you. Me and my house, we will be following the ways of the Lord. We will serve the Lord.

Once we have chosen the ways of the Lord, there are many pathways one can walk. The paths are not all the same, and each of us will take a different route to living into the pattern of Christ.

When I was in college, I got to spend a semester in Cambridge, England. The breaks between semesters in the English way are quite long, around a month or so. During one of the breaks, I took a train to Wales and got off near Tintern Abbey, which is just across the River Wye. It is one of the most beautiful places in the world, mysterious and mystical at the same time. When I awoke the next day, I knew I wanted to get to Mount Snowdon in the central part of Wales. I had my choice of trains, buses, hitchhiking or hiking the whole way there. I chose trains. Once there, I found a path that took me into Snowdonia National Park, where Mount Snowdon is located. The entrance path broke into many different paths, some taking me into the valleys and farm fields in the valleys of the mountains, some going up the mountain, and some going past the mountain. Each one would be a different perspective on an even more beautiful place on earth than Tintern Abbey. Once a person comes down off Snowdon Mountain, though, you quickly run into ancient stone walls with gates built into them. Some gates are left open, and some are closed. The expectation was that those journeying and walking in the ways of Wales were adult enough to respect boundaries and to know that an open gate meant you could cross a farmer's field, and a closed gate meant you couldn't.

This is what I think of when I think of walking in the ways of the Lord. There are many paths and some of those paths demand that we respect the boundaries of that path. Others are wide open trails that lead to the same place. We must choose how we will walk these pathways and where we wish to go as we follow them.

We say in our covenant that *“We covenant with God and with one another...to walk in the ways of the Lord”*. Walking in the ways of the Lord is often thought of as getting from one place to another, but part of walking the ways of the Lord is also the emotional pathways we walk as part of our faith as well. Like the pathways at Mount Snowdon in Wales, there are many pathways in the emotional landscape. Some also have open gates, and others have closed gates.

The open gate pathways of walking the emotional pathways of the Lord are paths like joy, happiness, affection, good will, love, harmony, gentleness, equanimity toward all, self-control, generosity. These are all good and wonderful open gates worthy of walking toward.

When I was on Mount Snowdon, it started raining. The weather turned cold. I was not dressed for it and my rain coat was quite useless, as it turned out. My hope had been to walk to the town of Dolgellau (dol-geth-ah) once I came off the mountain, which is where I planned to stay for the night and also a place where I have ancestry. But it was pouring rain. I was wet, cold, and a little depressed. But in the parking lot, I met a couple who were driving to the coast and through Dolgellau. They happily gave me a ride to the town.

I believe we want all the pathways we walk with the Lord to be joyous and happy. I believe many of us think there is something wrong with our faith when we feel depressed, guilty, sad, dejected, or despairing. We try to, as they say, ‘get over it’. We try to minimize those difficult experiences for the sake of something better. We diminish ourselves and our relationship with Christ because we believe God wants us to ‘feel better’, ‘be happy’, ‘smile more’.

But that is not the story of the disciples in Scripture. Sometimes it gets cold and rains hard on our expectations of what we had hoped for. The disciples are often portrayed as scared, dejected, broken, motivated by betrayal, even. And yet, what happens? Jesus meets them in those very places. It is precisely in those difficult places when Jesus shows up.

Today’s story from Luke focuses on one of those very difficult feelings, perhaps the most difficult. Grief. Grief envelops us. Grief stretches out time because we remember the past with the person who has died, and we imagine what the future would have been like if they had lived. Grief consumes our every thought, even to the point of summoning the presence of the one who has died in every aspect of our lives. Grief traverses a whole host of lesser emotions in a given day. Sometimes grief lasts for days, months, years. Sometimes, it never goes away. Grief paints the canvas of our lives with memories, feelings, and the absence of one who was loved.

In the book *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams, the story follows the lives of a warren of rabbits. One of the rabbits is the seer, or the prophet, for the warren. His name is Hazel. Hazel is very sensitive and seems to always have one foot in this world and another in the spiritual realms. One of his closest friends is Big Wig. Big Wig is the fiercest and strongest rabbit in the warren. One day, Big Wig gets hung up in barbed wire set up by a vicious farmer. Hazel is convinced Big Wig has died and says one of the most poignant and beautiful expressions of grief in literature. Hazel says,

*“My heart has joined the Thousand, for my friend stopped running today.”*

Grief has a way of flowing into every aspect of our lives. The grief we feel fills up all the empty places with the absence of the one who has died, the one or ones who should be here with us instead of in the ground.

WH Auden, in his poem *Another Time*, expresses grief this way:

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good."*

This is the state of our disciples on the road to Emmaus - deep grief at bearing witness to the death of Jesus upon the Cross. The stranger who walks with them asks what they are talking about. The disciples begin each of their statements with the phrase, *We had hoped*. We had hoped Jesus was the Messiah. We had hoped Jesus was the one who would free us. We had hoped Jesus would be with us into the future. We had hoped the person we loved so much would be with us now.

As we begin to take into account the future of Rockland Congregational Church, I think it is really important to acknowledge this place on the road we share with these disciples. Grief is indeed part of the walk in the ways of the Lord that we do not like to acknowledge. But it really is where God and Jesus show up all the time in Scripture. Places of grief, sadness, despair, loss, pain, suffering. This is where Jesus meets us.

So what is it that *We had hoped for as a church*? What is it *we had hoped for* in our future? What is it we had hoped would happen in our lives of faith together and personally by way of our fellowship with one another here at Rockland Congregational Church?

Let me be clear here. We should not be acting as if this church is dead and dying. We should not be closing the doors before we even know whether that is even a possibility. But like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we cannot get to the table with Jesus until we acknowledge the grief and sadness of what has happened and what is before us. We do not recognize the presence of Christ until we walk with Jesus in our grief.

When we walk in the ways of the Lord we are also walking in the ways of our losses and our failures and our griefs and our sorrows. It may be that our grief is so great it blinds us to what is going on around us and who is with us in the midst of our suffering. This is what I believe is happening with the disciples on the way to Emmaus. They cannot see correctly. But they have to express and get through their grief in order to see, or rather feel, the presence of Jesus. Because they did feel it. They say, "*Were not our hearts burning as he talked and walked with us?*" They confused their burning hearts for grief instead of the presence of Christ. Things can get very confusing in the emotions of loss.

In the same way we must get through the last days of Jesus and walk with him to the Cross in order to get to the Resurrection, we also must walk the ways of the Lord through grief and sorrow in order

to recognize the presence of Jesus at our table. This is why the walk with Jesus is not easy. It is a narrow road, as Matthew says, and some of the gates are not open to us.

*“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”*

The easier paths that move along the valley floor, which are wide and not blocked by ancient stone boundary markers and closed gateways, are not our path. Ours is a narrower path that leads through some hard things, like grief and reflecting what we had hoped for. The narrower paths along the mountain can be wet and cold. But at the end of that path, and the thing that is so easy to forget in these walks on the pathways of the Lord, is the breaking of bread with Jesus. In that breaking of the bread, that communion with one another, everything changes. The past changes. The future changes. Time itself changes.

So let us share in communion together and remember that whether we are in grief or in hope, our house chooses the ways of the Lord. We covenant with one another and with God to walk in those ways with the Lord.

Amen.