

SERMON: Faith Forward
TEXT: Luke 24:13-32

These last several weeks have been an emotional roller coaster for me - and, I would imagine, for many of you, as well. The high point on the roller coaster for me is full of energy and inspiration. Writing sermons, planning online worship, walking outside and enjoying the beauty of springtime, even tackling some home projects that have been on my list for quite some time. At these moments, I am determined to make the most of this time, to fill it with purpose, to learn and to teach and to make a difference in my world and in the lives of others.

But at the low point of the roller coaster, I am nearly paralyzed. The only movement I can seem to accomplish is pushing back in my recliner, clicking the TV remote, and bringing my hand to my mouth to eat. My brain shuts down, and I care about nothing.

I've been here before. The feeling is familiar. This is the roller coaster of grief. The low points are filled with sadness and shock, fear of an unknown future, inability to think straight, a deep loneliness and emptiness. At the other end, a determination to keep moving, to get through this, to survive.

Easter was a high point, because we were all determined to celebrate the resurrection. But by the afternoon, I was back in my recliner, not caring. Because it didn't feel like Easter. We are still in our tombs, and it doesn't feel like a time of new life at all.

It makes it easier to understand the two men on their way to Emmaus. For them, it is still the day of resurrection, but they are grieving. Though it appears that they didn't know Jesus personally, they are grieving the loss of hope. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

Their grief over the death of Jesus is also mixed with confusion and uncertainty because they have heard reports that his tomb was found empty and rumors that he is alive. They are talking over and processing the events of the last several days with one another, when a stranger joins them on the road.

I am astonished that they are able to move at all in this emotional state, much less take a seven-mile walk to Emmaus. When I imagine myself in their place, I think I would still be feeling paralyzed with the weight of it all. Still trying

to get my head around it. Still trying to figure out what to do next. I guess they're doing the same. They're just doing it while on the road.

Eric Barreto is Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He begins his commentary on this passage by reviewing how "Luke's narratives take us on the road frequently. A journey brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. A road is the narrative setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan. A road leads the prodigal back home to his father....The roads continue in the Book of Acts where, for instance, Paul encounters the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus. There is something about travel that evokes Luke's literary and theological imagination. There is something about roads, the way roads bring us together, the way roads can pose a danger to us all, the way roads become a symbol of a faith on the move." (Eric Barreto, www.workingpreacher.org, April 26, 2020)

We are currently on a journey which we did not choose, and we're not even sure where we're going or if we're even moving at all. We pray that this road will bring us back together someday soon. But right now it is a dangerous road. And while we are all anxious to get back to normal, I'm afraid this road leads to a place

that is nothing like “normal.” We may find ourselves doing a lot of two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of movement.

One thing that I need to remind myself of is to take just one step at a time. When I look ahead and wonder what life will be like - and what the world will be like - this summer, or this fall, Christmas or even next Easter, it’s overwhelming and frightening, almost debilitating. But if I know I just need to get through today, I can handle that. One step at a time. One day at a time. As a friend of mine recently shared with me, “Yard by yard, life is hard; inch by inch it’s a cinch.” A while back, I learned it through an odd question and answer: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!”

The men on the road to Emmaus were so deep in grief and confusion that they didn’t realize it was Jesus who joined them in the journey. At first, he listened to their story, he let them process their experiences and emotions of the past few days. And then, he sort of slapped them out of the spiral of grief, back into reality. “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. And at their invitation, he stayed with them. He played host at the table as he blessed and broke the bread. Then he gave it to them and vanished from their sight.

Friends, Jesus is walking with us on this journey. And it's possible that we are so caught up in our own spiral of grief and fear and confusion, that we're not seeing him.

You know how, after every tragedy or disaster, someone reminds us of the advice Mister Rogers gave in a book he wrote on parenting? "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, '*Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.*'" I would say the same thing about Jesus, and I imagine Presbyterian Pastor Fred Rogers would agree. When we are in the midst of scary things in life, we need to look for Jesus. He's walking right beside us.

I have a framed calligraphy verse hanging on my wall at home, with the words of St. Patrick's Breastplate:

Christ be with me, Christ within me.

Christ behind me, Christ before me.
Christ beside me, Christ to win me.
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me.
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger.
Christ in hearts of all the love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Every step of the way, in every situation - if we're looking for him, we will find Jesus.

Furthermore, we need to go back to our Bibles and be reminded of God's faithfulness and God's promises as Jesus reminded the men on the road. Like the Psalm that we began today's service with: "O sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things....God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God." (Psalm 98:1, 3)

And may we be fed and nourished by Jesus, as he hosted the meal and broke the bread at the table for them.

Knowing that Jesus goes with us and will never leave us or forsake us, may we continue FAITH FORWARD on the journey to new life, abundant life, and everlasting life... to the glory of God!

AMEN.