

Looking backward to live forward

Luke 24:13-35

March 31 2019

You know, I think, that I travel to India every year to see how things are going with our charity over there, Friends of Christ in India.

This year I took 13 folks from this church with me, last year 16 of you came along.

And it is fun to be with a whole lot of friends.

But six years ago, there were just two of us who went, and that was kind of fun, too.

Fellow FOCI Board member Carol Passmore and I went over together just to check on our programs and meet with our leaders.

We had great conversations with the good people there, we hung out with the kids in the schools we support, we visited the elderly and the hospitals.

And we were well taken care of –

as is always true when we visit, we were shepherded everywhere we went, watched over so that we were never just two women on our own.

Until one afternoon.

There was nothing on the schedule, everyone else was busy,

it was a beautiful day in Khammam, India, and Carol and I decided to go for a walk.

We felt just a little daring, because, as I said, we never went anywhere on our own.

So, like two kids sneaking out of the house after the parents have gone to sleep,

we slipped out the front gate of the house where we were staying, and off we went.

We wandered down this street and that,
explored areas we'd never been to,
stopped into shops, got some snacks, talked to lots of people,
and after just an hour or so, we headed back home,
feeling slightly triumphant about our escapade.

Pausing to cross one of the insanely busy streets,
I noticed the man standing next to us.
What a coincidence! It was one of our friends!
Prabhakar! I said – what are you doing here?
I've been with you the whole time, he said.
I saw you leave the house, and I was worried.
I thought, you might not be knowing the way home.
I thought, someone might give you trouble.
So I have been walking with you the whole time.

And you know what I felt?
Okay, a little chagrined.
And maybe a little guilty.
But mostly, I felt incredibly comforted
at the thought that we were so deeply cared for.
To think that you were alone and then find out that you never were,
well, that's actually pretty cool.

That night, I told David the story, and he laughed.
The same thing had happened to him,
also in India, decades earlier.
He'd gone out for a run, and after a time had become aware of footsteps
behind him.
He picked up his pace, and so did the person following him,
and he began to run all-out, and *still* was being chased –
he arrived back to his hotel exhausted,

but not as exhausted as the poor guy who came trailing in behind him, who, yes, was a fellow Christian tasked with watching over the American pastor.

Like me, David had thought he was alone –
but he was never alone.

Like me, he found it comforting – though he did regret the all-out sprint at the end.

The gospel story that Jason just read to you is about two people who think they're heading out for a walk on their own, but they're not.

They think they're alone, really alone, but they are anything but.

I should actually probably be preaching this sermon a few weeks from now, because the story takes place on Easter.

Easter afternoon.

Jesus has risen from the dead, but these two people don't know that yet. Which is too bad, because these two people -- Cleopas and his friend -- were Jesus followers.

And so they're broken hearted as they're taking this walk, because Jesus, as far as they know, is gone forever.

The man they had staked their lives on has been killed, the man they saw teaching and healing and doing miracles, he's gone.

And they're walking, they're actually walking out of town, leaving Jerusalem because, really, why stay there anymore.

It's over.

And as they're walking, they become aware of footsteps.

May have freaked them out as much as David was freaked out by his unexpected companion,

probably surprised them as much as Carol and I were surprised.

They thought they were alone.

They weren't.

They don't recognize the guy who has suddenly turned up,
but weirdly, strangely, as they talk to him,
they start to feel better.

This man starts telling them that really, things may be okay,
he starts reminding them of all the scripture stories about the Messiah,
and about hope, and keeping hope alive.

And it isn't until much much later

that they realize who it was who was walking with them.

They sit down eat dinner with him, and there's something about the way he
breaks the bread in front of him – and they realize.

It's Jesus. It was Jesus all day long. It was Jesus walking with them all that
time.

We should have known right away, they say to each other –
of course it was him,

Were not our hearts burning within us as he talked to us?

One of the great lines of scripture, and where the term 'heartwarming'
actually comes from –

we could have known it was Jesus, they say --- our hearts were warmed by
him.

I happen to love this gospel story.

I love it because this story, like no other, has helped me to understand that
the life of faith is lived backward as much as forwards.

The life of faith is lived backward as much as forward.

I mean by that

that learning to find Christ in your past

is just as important as finding Christ in the present.

When the disciples finally get that Jesus is with them –

in this 'aha' moment when he breaks bread in front of them,

in that moment they are suddenly able to look back on their journey

to that point
 and realize that Jesus has been walking right next to them the whole way.
 That, in other words, their entire journey,
 including their grieving and their confusion,
 that all of that has been lived in the presence of Christ.
 That they were walking, all along, in Christ's presence.

This is a story, this gospel story, that tells us we ought to look at our lives the same way:

to look back on the road that's brought us to whatever place we're at
 and to see the ways in which Jesus has been present,
 all along,
 all along,

moments of grace and nearness that we may not have recognized at the time
 but which nonetheless were moments of God's presence,
 holy moments.

Kierkegaard, one of those old theologians that I had to wrestle with in seminary,

he said that we live life forward by understanding it backward.

We live life forward by understanding it backward.

Faith means learning to find God in the past
 as well as seeing God in our present.

Faith is looking back over our lives to this moment
 and seeing the ways in which God was present with us on the road all along.

Here's an example.

People often ask me to describe the moment that I knew I should be a minister.

They figure there's got to be a good story,
 you know, like everyone likes a good proposal story.

There are some great called-to-be-a-minister stories out there,

but I don't have one.

All I did, in all honesty, was finally look backward to live forward.

I looked back at my life and saw that someone had been walking beside me for a long time,

steering me along in what I could see now was a pretty obvious direction.

I looked back and saw that it had been Christ in the person of my youth group leader who showed me what faith looked like:

it looked like joy and welcome.

I saw that Jesus had been sitting beside me that time in tenth grade when I put my head down in church to pray and suddenly realized I was really, *really* praying like my life depended on it.

I realized that Christ had been present in that moment when one of my college friends said, "you know, I could totally see you as a minister."

I didn't hear a blast of trumpets,

I just saw, by looking backward,

how God had been present in moment after moment after moment.

The life of faith is lived as much backward as forward,
meeting God in the past as much as in the present.

The great Christian writer Frederick Buechner

writes this about the moment he came to believe.

He had struggled through a troubled childhood, a difficult adolescence, the early death of his father --

and yet also, all along, he had been in the presence of people who loved him, teachers who gently steered him

and friends who did their best.

"What I found then," he writes,

"was what I had already half seen, or less than half,

in many places over my twenty-seven years

without ever clearly knowing *what* it was I was seeing

or even that I was seeing anything of great importance...

Here at the end I am left with no other way of saying it

than that what I saw there *finally* was Christ.”

The life of faith is lived as much backward as forward,
looking at the journey to this place
and recognizing who it is who has walked alongside us:
Moments of grace that we don't see until we look back at them.
As it says in the beautiful novel *Gilead*, which we've read here:
there are visions that come to us only in retrospect.

So what does that mean, to live your faith backward:
how do you go about meeting God in your past?

Well, start with the memories that warm your heart.
When were your moments of blessing –
when did joy rush into your soul –
when were you aware of wonder,
when did you experience grace, forgiveness, love?
Look back to the moments your heart burned within you.

Then look back at the moments that changed you for the better,
at someone or something who opened your eyes,
or something you changed in yourself.
Maybe it was hard – probably it was hard –
but you became someone new after that.

Look back, too, at what hurt you, what grieved you –
and marvel at how you lived through,
how you were carried through.

Then look for the people:
the ones who were there at just the right time,
who offered you some gift of the spirit that was just what was needed.

When you do all that, here's what happens:
 When you look back and are amazed
 at how you managed to get through what you thought you *couldn't* get
 through,
 you see now that the power to do it came from somewhere beyond you.

As you look back and trace the winding path that you took to a decision
 you can see now the wisdom that guided your way.

In remembering the people who
 at some point in your life
 made all the difference,
 you realize now that God was present in those people, Christ was those
 people.

Living faith backwards
 means remembering compassion offered unexpectedly,
 forgiveness given undeservedly,
 a second chance, a moment of blessing.
 And seeing now, knowing now,
 that those were the moments of God's presence –
 that those were God moments.

We meet God in our present
 by taking the time to look for God in our past.
 We look to see the moments in which God was our companion,
 when there were footsteps alongside us that we may not have heard then but
 that we hear now.
 We see the sacred journeys on which we have not walked alone,
 and we begin to realize that there was **no** journey on which we walked alone.

Just as I came to realize on that busy road in Khammam,
just as David discovered at the end of a long run in Vellore –
just as Cleopas and his friend discovered on their weary walk from
Jerusalem.

The life of faith is lived as much backward as forward.
Look back and see. Look back and see.

Amen.