

WALK THIS WAY

They are two roads, two paths among many. Two roads down which you and I might someday travel if we have not done so already. Two means, if you will, by which we might find ourselves truly “breaking bread” and transforming lives and seeking spirit and nourishing the soul and fishing for the future. One is the Road to Emmaus, the other is the Road to Damascus (an alternate and equally well-known reading appointed early on in this unfolding season). In these days and weeks after Easter we get a glimpse of both, and in so doing we get a glimpse of ourselves.

Though it is often risky to generalize, a wide sweep of the post-Easter and post-Resurrection stories in scripture reveal this: most of the characters and most of us are fairly uncertain about what we do now, where we go from here, what it all means, and what happens next. Most of us have little or no clue and are left, as we heard recently, to weep, to wonder, to wring our hands and shake our heads. This does not mean that the Gospels have left us bereft and forlorn, only that these many bible stories are now filled with anything but certainty, marked by anything but confidence, notable for anything but clarity, and overflowing with doubt while paradoxically inviting us to faith. Two roads, of which there are many.

On the way to Emmaus, *“two of them”* - the disciples - were *“talking with each other about all these things that had happened.”* [Luke 24:14] Clearly these two, like many of us, are vaguely aware of the world changing events at Golgotha and at the empty tomb. Yet as Jesus himself comes up to them and walks alongside them, they know not who he is. The two talk about what they have heard and what they think they know, all of which is a good sign. But then they digress and debate and devolve into befuddlement. Clearly these disciples know the story, or at least the rumors and the gossip which is floating around, but they do not yet know its meaning. Clearly, they care about its merits, but seemingly they remain confused by its import.

The very same author [in Acts of the Apostles, ch. 19] likewise offers us the familiar yet more intense story of the Road to Damascus. But here, Saul of Tarsus does not yet know that he is a disciple of any kind,

even if the Spirit has already anointed him as such. Saul seeks nothing but venom and bloodlust; he knows no agenda but hatred and persecution. It takes a lot of work and a lot of energy to be angry all the time but Saul is doing his best. His encounter with the Holy Spirit is far less gentle than that of the two heading to Emmaus. In his being struck down, Saul is then ministered to by others. He is sent to the Street called Straight, eventually receives the laying on of hands, undergoes baptism, the scales fall from his eyes, and his new ministry begins, a ministry which will for all time change the world as we know it.

Two roads among many, two paths toward learning and enlightenment and grace and salvation, two avenues by which to make our way in the world after Easter. As I said earlier, there are countless others. The Emmaus moment is repeated many times, and this persistent inability to recognize Jesus, or even the 'goodness' in their midst and in our midst, is an all too common and oft repeated experience, both in the School of Discipleship and in the wider world. The Damascus moment is far more striking, literally, and yet there are many of us who have had our own Damascus moments as well, and who yet just as often return to the old ways, before we really, truly, finally, get the message. (If you are part, in any way, of any recovery ministry, this perhaps strikes even closer to home). Either way, for better or worse, we are in the world in this time after Easter, and the central challenge remains for us as it did for our predecessors: **what do we do now?**

It would indeed be nice and perhaps ultimately reassuring were we to possess within us that clear-eyed and nearly ecstatic, psychedelic vision of John on Patmos as shared in 'The Book of Revelation': Angels and thrones and elders and song, and with each of us confidently affirming the "*blessing and honor and glory and might*" which has now accrued to our humble selves. It would be wondrous if we could, in fact, "*have genuine mutual love, [and] love one another deeply from the heart*", because our souls have indeed been "*purified...by your obedience to the truth.*" Much more likely, and certainly speaking for myself, that utter surety and that unblemished, confident affirmation still remains

a ways off. In my own lifetime, and despite my many hopes, quite frankly I would be shocked to experience such certainty to anywhere near this degree, if at all. It takes a lifetime, and it takes a village.

And, so, yet more questions arise, questions we must therefore ask ourselves in the aftermath. After Easter, and in these foreboding and unsettled times both then and now, we must imagine perhaps the central question of all central questions: What are we actually looking for? What exactly is it that we seek? What part of this faith journey requires our active acceptance and awareness? What part, if you will, is out of our hands and awaiting us in the future? In your life and in mine, in ours as a community, where is Emmaus, where is Damascus? Which way are we heading? Where are we going? Are our eyes and our hearts genuinely open to the possibility of such Spirit, such Christ, such Promise, such Surprise, literally walking alongside us and in our midst? Are we standing still, with our eyes wide shut? Are we walking away from something or are we walking towards something?

Quite frankly I do not know with certainty the answer to any of these questions, but I do know this: You and I are no different from those first seekers and wanderers. You and I are no different than everyone else who has come along and tried to figure out what lies ahead in life. You and I are no different, even 2000 years on, from those who were baffled and wandering and a touch clueless in their genial and spiritual meanderings. And you and I are no different, at least to some degree, from those whose attention can only be fixed by something so profound as an Emmaus Road experience, or a Damascus Road experience, and the quiet presence or striking intensity of a heavenly force. We are in all of these, and the power of each experience is likewise in each us. Two roads among many. Two paths before us. There are others. You know this.

In the classic, well worn, and oft-cited Robert Frost poem, two roads “diverge” in a wood, and the seeker embarks upon the less well known and hopefully more fortuitous path. The assumption is that a person must choose one or the other, and then discover along the way what lies ahead. More prosaically, when Dorothy asks her friend the Scarecrow for guidance he simply says: *“some go this way, and some go*

that way." And again, the road ahead suggests divergence and stark choices, apparently good options as well as bad. But what if this is not so? What if that is not the case? What if the many roads embarked upon in Scripture and in life, different though they may all be, are actually convergent – leading not apart but together; leading not to a variety of places, but to the one place above all, for which our hearts and souls yearn - to the Risen Lord Jesus?

Such is the dilemma I have wrestled with for many years, even decades. What if, in fact, the great and mysterious and immense power of the Spirit is not one of divergence and division and choices which often feel like a zero-sum game? Instead, what if the deeper and mystically emerging truth is the opposite, a path, many paths, countless paths, whose great and worthy and mystical goal is actually convergence, the coming together of the many, the gathering in of all, in a way that is more radical, more countercultural, and more world and life transforming than anything yet imagined?

In the 20th century to be sure, many a spiritual leader, writer, teacher, prophet, you name it, has suggested or encouraged exactly this. From Baha'i Ullah all the way back to Buddha; from the ancient teachings and enduring hopes of the three great Abrahamic lineages to the 'here and now'; from those whose experience was once branded as heresy but which we now, hopefully, receive with some capacity for examination, reason, spiritual imagination, and even possible inclusion. Might it not be, when all is said and done, that the paradoxical message of the post-Easter world, then and now, is actually an invitation and a summons to be more, not less open; to be more, not less, exclusive or dismissive; to be more, not less, curious and accepting of the countless ways by which God and the Holy Spirit and all the great Immensities which shape our beings and our hearts are quietly conspiring to join us rather than to divide us? I do not know for sure. But I do know, and I openly confess, that this has been a great spiritual lesson for me over the course of my lifetime. And the doors which have been opened, and the learnings received, and the love bestowed, and the people met, have been worth every ounce of effort and wonder and struggle and curiosity and hardship, and for me, there is now no turning back.

These roads, all these roads, all the many ways by which you and I shall come to encounter God and Christ and Holy Spirit in the life after Easter - lead not away but towards, converging in the one great truth of hope and redemption and forgiveness; the one great truth of resurrection promise and new life; the one great hope of salvation itself. Or, at least, this is what the Holy Spirit has been and is still teaching me, in late April of 2020, after all these years.

No, the road is not simple, and it is not easy. It never has been. It is not simple now. There are sacrifices we make and there are prices we pay. But the road is where we are meant to be. Remember always, whatever your struggles or your fears or your doubts, to *“love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.”* [1 Peter 1:23]

It has been a busy time. A good time. A hard time. An uncertain time. Ultimately, a hopeful time. We have walked through much. Thank you, one and all, for the courage to embark upon this path, in this time and in this place. May this voyage, your voyage, our voyage, continue.

~ ***Amen.***