

Easter 3 – A April 26, 2020

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Traveling is magical for me. In a lot of ways, it doesn't really matter where I go – there is just something about shutting the door on the house knowing that I won't open it again for a few days or a couple of weeks. That single action of shutting the door sets me free for whatever adventure awaits me.

I had four trips planned for between March and July of this year. For a variety of reasons, my husband and I have hardly traveled at all for the last 15 years and this spring was to be the beginning of a series of adventures. Now, of course, traveling is simply off the table. I know that many of you like to travel and that your plans have also changed. Such is life under quarantine. And that's okay because most of us are willing to do our part, whatever it takes to help get this virus under control.

When I am going someplace familiar, I look forward to it with great anticipation as I suspect is true for many of you who have special places. One of my sacred places, that I always looked forward to visiting when I lived in Baltimore, was a back-country camping spot in West Virginia. It was a beautiful place in the Appalachian Mountains that was right by a crystal clear stream that had the perfect configuration of boulders for sunbathing that surrounded a perfect swimming hole. In my over 30 years in the Puget Sound area, I have hiked and backpacked to many wonderful places but never anything quite like this little spot because the mountain lakes and the streams in Washington State are always, always very cold. This place in the mountains of West Virginia is a place I experienced God as well as relatively warm water.

In today's gospel, we encounter two men as they begin their journey home from Jerusalem. We don't know much about them except that they are part of the larger group of followers of Jesus and one of them is named Cleopas. We are told that they are talking as they make their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Maybe they needed to debrief from all that had happened to Jesus; maybe they needed to escape and take a break from all the pressures of the recent weeks. Maybe they needed time to grieve the loss of their leader. At any rate, here they are on this remote road and what should happen but a stranger comes sidling up beside them asking all kinds of rather invasive questions. As we know, they don't figure out that it is Jesus until they arrive home and Jesus breaks bread.

There are lots of wonderful things about this story such as Jesus' playfulness as he lets these two men retell the entire story of his death and reported resurrection without revealing who he is but today we will focus on the importance of place. Despite the fact that it was never a town of any significance, Emmaus is where these two travelers discover the identity of their companion. It is where they discover who Christ really is.

Emmaus is really a nothing place. Most Biblical authorities cannot even agree on where Emmaus is located. However, it is a special place for these two travelers because it is home; it is where they encounter Christ. The importance of place for us is equally powerful.

My former church in Federal Way had at least five AA meetings when I became rector in 1997. AA groups were there all the time and while it was a great ministry, the frequent meetings made it difficult for the church to have much in the way of mid-week programs. Finally the vestry decided to ask the Thursday evening group to find another location. The weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth was formidable and quite frankly something I did not really understand until someone finally said to me: "The reason this is so hard for me is that this room is where my life changed forever. It was in this room that I discovered that God could help me stop drinking." Then I understood the power behind the resistance for that group to find another location. I finally understood the emotion. The power of place...

Fast forward to our current situation where we are responding to the call to stay home in order to stay safe. With the exception of those who live with domestic violence - and that is a very big concern - staying home is safe. If we are involved in an active lifestyle, staying home might be frustrating but it is safe. I certainly miss doing some the things that are important to me - seeing my children and grandchildren, rehearsing and singing with my chorus in Seattle, coming to church and getting together with friends. But, for my husband and me, there has been much joy in staying home. Prayer, reflection and reading along with the many engaging TV programs have all contributed to my contentment. When I start to feel restless or feel annoyed about the five trips I had to cancel, I am reminded of the health care workers - from doctors to cleaning people and the many essential workers who are risking their lives everyday to keep our lives in some semblance of order, I am grateful that I have a home that I love and two family members I can hug.

All of us know that God can be experienced and Christ can be found in many places outside of a church. We may love our church building and it may be a place of great solace but we are having to adapt. Our homes have become our sanctuary in more ways than ever before. Our homes are where we sleep, prepare meals and where we find Christ.

When we have spiritual experiences such as the disciples in Emmaus, we see things differently. Sometimes it takes us a while to "get it". Even though we have heard an explanation of sorts about this or that, it may take a while for us to understand the true meaning. During quarantine, a number of interesting things have been written about how life might be different when the quarantine is over, that perhaps we will be less materialistic, that we might enjoy just being home, that we will continue to enjoy cooking and raising food in our gardens. Like the travelers on the Road to Emmaus, our eyes will begin to see things differently.

There is also hope that we can seek to change the underbelly of American society that we are seeing more clearly than ever before. If you are following the news at all, you know about the dire situation in Detroit, it's been there for years, but not quite exposed in the way it is now. Pockets of desperation that have been hidden in the shadows are having powerful lights shown on them. The vast inequality in American society is right there for all to see.

There is a quote from Gandhi that has been a mantra for those seeking justice and a greater sense of equality among people of the world or even just the people of this country. Gandhi said as he strove for justice in India: "Live simply so that others may simply live." These words have meant a great deal to me during the course of my adult life. I'm not sure I've incorporated them all that well into my life; I am deeply aware of my material abundance when lined up against that of the majority of the world. But they are words that have surfaced for me during this time of quarantine.

I recently read a book called "Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope" by Nicholas Kristof and Sherlyl WuDunn. I came of age in the 60's and 70's when people were questioning everything, asking big important questions. Sometimes the envelope got pushed too far but overall, I believe that time in history was important in terms of reopening the dialogue about economic justice as well as racism, sexism, classism and all the other isms. Wonderful things evolved including the establishment of Earth Day which we just observed this past week!

50 year anniversary! And then bit by bit, a little bit here and a little bit there from the 1980's on, many of those questions were shut down and we stopped asking. It was as if our eyes slowly closed and we became as spiritually blind as the disciples were on the Road to Emmaus. This book **Tightrope** is compelling because it traces the history of the disintegration of our country through the stories of individuals and a close examination of public policy. Though it was published before the Pandemic, it is a timely book.

I think this time of quarantine could have some great benefits to American society if we allow big questions and thoughts to shape the way we see the world. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were so blind that they did not recognize the very man for whom they grieved. It was not until they arrived home that they were able to see the risen Christ for who he is. Perhaps the same is true for us. Perhaps this time of quarantine can be a time of rich reflection, a time during which our eyes open wide to the possibility of a different world, a better world. Just maybe.