

Finlandia University
2017 Baccalaureate Service
Luke 24 – The Road to Emmaus

Faith lived on the way ... and from glimpse to glimpse. These are my thoughts for us this morning.

It's been a tumultuous three days in Jerusalem. Cleopas and his un-named companion have had enough. They are heading home to Emmaus. These followers of Jesus are dispirited, crushed. Jesus, the prophet of God, one who was to restore all things is dead, crucified, the preferred method of capital punishment in the Roman Empire. To add confusion to their grief, rumors have started flying that Jesus has risen from the dead and has been seen alive. Enough's enough. Emmaus is their destination—getting a bit of distance between them and the upheaval will help. But a funny thing happens on the way.

The life of faith is lived on the way.

The life of faith, as it has come down through Christian tradition, can and often has, regrettably become a religion practiced with a preoccupation with life after death. That is, the life of faith fixated on one's final destination, eternal salvation, Heaven. It is true, Christian teaching clearly and repeatedly witnesses to the promise of everlasting life. Yet, as I read and study scripture and experience God in my life I see things differently. Jesus was preoccupied with the stuff of this life, everyday life, life now.

I simply want us to consider that our spiritual destination is already promised, it is a given. So then, the life of faith is all about the present, the now, the journey. There is a strong and thoroughgoing on-the-wayness in our gospel stories. Scholars have long appreciated this literary feature in Gospels such as Luke. These stories first orally transmitted through believing communities, later compiled into sayings and miracles, and finally arranged into the narratives we today call the Gospels, place so much teaching, preaching, and healing of Jesus on the way.

So we experience in the figure of Jesus this persistent road and way-ness, a between-here-and-there-ness in the narrative structure of our gospels: people healed on the way, questions asked on the way, parables spoken on the way, miracles performed, crowds parading, crosses carried, all, on the way to somewhere else.

This literary feature in this story, I believe, is a feature of our own stories, our stories of faith. Most of life, our life, happens on the way.

We enter college with a destination in mind: to earn an academic degree. This is the right point on the map. No doubt. At the same time, what of the space in between that first semester exam and that final exam or senior project or internship presentation this semester? What about the journey in between class, lab, and library? So much life happened on the way, didn't it, toward earning that academic credential: good, bad, and ugly: new relationships formed, others broken, missed opportunities and new opportunities taken, unexpected detours or irritating speed bumps; unrealized and realized goals, successes and failures. And those lessons learned on the way may stick longer, should we be honest, than many of those lectures and labs. I have from time to time been compelled to say to our new incoming students "Don't let your studies get in the way of your education." It's another way of saying, a lot of life and learning awaits us on the way, in the spontaneous, the unexpected, the interruptions.

The Jesus of Christian Scripture and those who would choose to follow this figure, are preoccupied with the present, doing life today, on the way: the seeking of justice for those oppressed; in advocating for the poor and marginalized in our communities; in seeking those things that make for peace, in our neighborhoods and around the world; in befriending the frightened, the lonely, the little ones; in welcoming the stranger as neighbor; in sharing the Good News, loving mercy and kindness, and in living mindful, always living mindful of others and those with less. The life of faith is a now faith.

The song writer, Marty Haugen has it right: "Not in the dark of buildings confining, not in some heaven light years away, here in this place the new light is shining, now is the kingdom, and now is the day." It is here, then, on the way, now, where though dimly perhaps, and so often mistakenly, we meet Jesus over and over again, even as we hope for the day when we will, unmistakably, see him face to face. So faith is lived, on the way. But it is also lived glimpse to glimpse.

Living from glimpse to glimpse

Our story, if it suggests anything, suggests that Jesus is one quite elusive character. On the road ... present but incognito ... then at the table, in the breaking of bread, suddenly recognized ... then only to vanish abruptly. If we don't get lost in our attempt to reconstruct with the modern mind an historical event we may more fully experience the story's truth: Jesus does not remain always clearly in view. What is to be made of this? Jesus will always resist final definition, ultimate explanation, no matter how much we may want it otherwise. So, realizing we live glimpse to glimpse, we remain humble in our truth claims. Jesus,

though always with us, is always beyond us. Jesus is not captive to our own personal and narrow experience of him, or our churchly dogmas, or our systematic theologies, or our liturgies and sacraments. We know and yet we do not know. Jesus, both revealed and hidden. The life of faith is lived glimpse to glimpse.

You see, faith is uneven. It is so often lived with and through the movements in today's story from Luke: Jesus with us when we don't get it ... Jesus vanishing, just when we do. Jesus, grasped momentarily then slips through our fingers. We wonder, was that a God thing or not? Were our hearts burning or was that just heart burn?

This does not mean, however, that the life of faith is simply a good guess. Faith is a gift, rooting itself deep within, life-altering, life-centering; it becomes our very breath our very being. Believing is not guessing. Faith is not without reason, without intellect. It is simply lived glimpse to glimpse.

So I offer this: if our lives of faith are lived glimpse to glimpse then we do well to live lives that are, if you will, glimpse-friendly. Our story invites us to life choices, life rhythms, life practices and habits that may more readily offer such glimpses along the way: spiritual readings, prayer, meditation, worship, and service to neighbor. We will never catch a glimpse of the northern lights unless we look up. We will never glimpse Jesus in "the least of these" unless we leave the familiar and serve those with less. We will never grasp the still small voice unless we pause routinely to quiet ourselves. If the life of faith is lived glimpse to glimpse may we then live, so as to catch a glimpse.

When the two realize it was not heart burn, what do they do? They get up that very hour, so our story goes, and they leave to tell others. A glimpse is all it took to spur action. Up and out, back to Jerusalem to tell others, "what happened on the road and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread." Telling, it would seem, is part of the life of faith. So even if the life of faith is lived from glimpse to glimpse and keeps us humble in our truth claims, it as well compels us to tell what we know. Just because we do not know everything does not mean we say nothing. The life of faith calls us to speak of what we have come to know, with the humility and conviction that comes from life lived on the way and from glimpse to glimpse.

Amen