

Roads and Tables
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Years ago, I visited Bear Mountain Zoo, in New York State, with my children. In what I suppose was a new idea back then, they had designed the habitats for the large animals to be large outdoor areas instead of cages. So the animals had at least some room to move and jump and breathe. But when we came to the bear area, there was one old bear who just walked back and forth, back and forth, head down, pacing in one small corridor. It was tragic to watch, really, hard to watch. A man standing next to us said, maybe only half joking, "That's just how I feel most days." That aimless, futile pacing, head down, back and forth.

So, there is movement, walking, which can be aimless or can be a true journey. With one, there is no goal, no intention. With the other, even if you don't know **exactly** where you'll end up, there is purpose.

I people-watch, watching people eat alone in a fast food restaurant. It is now possible to actually get some nutrition at a fast food place: they have changed menus and made some accommodation to people's bodily needs and tastes. But even if you order the salad instead of the fries, there can be a sort of drudgery in eating alone, on the road. We do it, but it is not always a particularly joyful or meaningful experience. And so we distract ourselves with phone or Ipad.

So there is eating, which can physically filling or can also be sharing a meal. With one, we are merely satisfying the body. With the other, even if we don't sit down with great expectations, the heart is nourished.

Today in Scripture, we read about being on the road and being at the table. But it is not about a specific road or a specific table. It's about what how we are transformed in those kinds of places.

The journey is one of the oldest biblical symbols. From the time Adam and Eve left the first garden, people have been walking. If you want to read science into the story, you can see it as symbolic of earliest humanoid nomads leaving their African home. Then, Abraham leaves his father's country and wanders all through the promised land. Moses makes his first journey in a basket, but goes on to walk to Midian, back to Egypt, through the desert again, and to the borders of Canaan. Jesus walked all through Galilee and Judea. The Apostles spread out from Jerusalem all through the Roman Empire. Nomads and pilgrims, all of them.

The meal is also an important biblical symbol. Abraham invites 3 angels to a meal in his tent and hears that he is going to be come a father; God provides meals in the wilderness for the wandering Hebrews; Jesus frequently sits at meals with tax collectors and sinners; the earliest church demonstrated its unity by sharing frequent meals. In the Bible, there is always a feast going on somewhere.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that, on the same day that Jesus' tomb was found empty, two disciples went walking. They were leaving Jerusalem, that dangerous place of grief, to go to another village a day's walk away. Exhausted and saddened by the events of the past week, maybe they were going home to recover. They were not part of the 12 disciples that we normally list: some people think that it was Cleopas and his wife, a married couple, who were walking along. According to John's Gospel, Mary Cleopas had seen the crucifixion in person. I imagine that they were traumatized and confused. They had expected a different outcome from Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. And now there were rumors of appearances: unsettling, disturbing rumors. A third walker joins them, unfamiliar, but friendly, curious. The conversation changes the walk to a village into a totally different journey: a pilgrimage into a new understanding of what had been happening in Jerusalem.

On the road to Emmaus, in companionship with the Stranger-Jesus, they discover a new world of possibility. Something is drawing them forward, something is compelling them towards new life. They are not really conscious of it, but they feel it. Along our own pathways, we may be receiving visions, possibilities, guidance and inspiration. Sometimes we know it. Sometimes we just feel it.

The Gospel seems to be telling us that we can be transformed by movement: that we may experience the presence of a Risen Jesus in moments of spiritual or physical movement and growth, in moments of adventurous thinking or traveling, in pilgrimages on foot, in the questing pilgrimage of the soul. We are transformed when we move. The Easter presence of God seems to be found in a process rather than in stability or stasis. When we want to be inspired, we have to be on the road, because God is on the road.

Walking and talking, the Cleopas couple found a companion who was so compelling that he reached through to their breaking hearts, their depressed spirits, their tired bodies. They give this stranger, who seems oddly clueless about the biggest news of the week, a synopsis of the story: "Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. Our leaders condemned and executed him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. And now some in our group have told the most amazing stories about empty tombs and visions of angels." Rather than seeming surprised by Cleopas' words the stranger exclaims that they are slow of heart to believe. (A little brusque, I think.) But he gives them the interpretive tools they need, a handle on current events, a story line that gives them hope. Walking and talking, they feel the effect of his words. Their hearts catch fire, they can see a different future.

The couple then does something rather amazing to us, but perhaps common in their culture. They reach out in hospitality and invite the stranger to supper. But this stranger has a way of reversing roles. He acts like the host at the table, as though he had invited **them** to the meal. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them: all the gestures of three days before. We call that Thursday night meal the Last Supper, but we were wrong. Turns out it wasn't the Last Supper, and neither is this one. Biblically speaking, there is always a feast going on, somewhere.

In this juxtaposition of teacher and stranger, guest and host, grief and hospitality, something clicks for Cleopas and Mary. Their eyes open. One brief moment of recognition. They can't hold on to the exact experience. They see and know the Risen Christ, but can't hold on. A temporary mystical moment, showing that assurance may be temporary, inspiration may be brief, and mountaintop experiences can't last. But God is there in the details, illuminating those moments with

holiness then moving on, inviting us to follow, to get back on the road. Faithfully we remember those teachings and those meals that gave us strength, faithfully we seek new teachings and new opportunities to sit at the table together.

One of the most poignant words that the disciples spoke while on the road was, “We had hoped...” Hope in the past tense. Usually when we hear this, it is followed by “but.” We had hoped to raise more money, but... We had hoped to hold a big celebration, but... We had hoped that everyone could get along, but... We had hoped that we could find common ground, but...

The disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem and transform their people. But. But then he was executed. So that was a dead end. Right? Like the bear pacing back and forth in his compound, they couldn't get out of this muddle, this thought pattern. Back and forth, back and forth, head down. They needed someone from the outside to point out the possibilities and redraw the road map. There was a way forward. They weren't stuck. They could hope.

The moment of inspiration may come from outside, but is carried out by the walker. One foot in front of the other, we keep on. At times it feels like plodding. At times we look back from whence we came, thinking, “We had hoped...” But then we get interested in what this person is saying, this person who seems to be able to connect all the dots, teaching and encouraging at the same time. If we are wise, we will want to prolong the conversation, to be hospitable to the stranger who warms our hearts and opens our eyes.

I think of the church as a place when we can experience the entire Emmaus road story. Some say that it is a metaphor for worship: the conversation on the road is the preaching of God's word and the table is Holy Communion. But we have just one hour of worship a week. Can't we take this story with us all week? One foot in front of the other. Learning, hoping, growing. One meal after another. Sharing, feeding, recognizing. Unless we can be transformed here we are just sad disciples, trudging without purpose.

In this Easter season, we read stories of mysterious resurrection appearances. Nobody was sitting around expectantly waiting for Jesus: he just appeared while people were busy living. If we want to be transformed, we might have to hear the Word on Sunday morning. But then real learning will be found in the many words that will teach us during the week, if we take time to listen. If we want to catch a glimpse of the one who was to redeem our world, we can come to the table in our community. Then we can go out and invite the stranger to our meals during the week.

We pray in faith that Jesus will meet us somehow, on the road or at the table. Then our pilgrimage will really begin. I want to share a poem with you that speaks to the holy journey, and maybe, to arriving at the heart's true home:

A Spiritual Journey by Wendell Berry
*And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles,
no matter how long,
but only by a spiritual journey,
a journey of one inch,
very arduous and humbling and joyful,
by which we arrive at the ground at our feet,
and learn to be at home.*