

Easter 3A
Sermon 4.26.20

1 Peter 1:17-23

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. ²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. (680)

We're on the road again. Though still sheltered in place, we're on the road again, this time on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. For that, maybe it comes as some relief. I know I'm getting a little weary of my blue chair.

Where have you been spending most of your time?

So, a relief: Luke has us on the road a lot. So much happens on roads according to this gospel writer. In both of this writer's books, both the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, this writer remembers the life of faith—the life, that is, of following Christ—as a life largely lived on the road, on the way from somewhere and to somewhere.

Consider: a journey is how it all begins, Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem by decree, and a road is the narrative setting for the very Lukan parable of the Good Samaritan, and a road leads the prodigal back home to his father. Finally, Jesus sets his eyes toward Jerusalem, but just halfway into this gospel narrative, and he spends the second half journeying there, a whole travel narrative wherein we find some of the most distinctively Lukan contributions to the story of Jesus.

Luke has us on the road a lot.

Continuing past the passion and resurrection narratives, on into the Book of Acts, roads still seem not just settings to the narratives but formative to the narrative, a suggestive theme to some larger truth. Paul encounters the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus, and then fills out the story of his preaching the church into being by journeying all over the Mediterranean region. As he goes, he grows.

Really, there's something about travel that "evokes Luke's literary and theological imagination," according to Eric Barreto, a New Testament scholar. "There is something about roads, the way roads bring us together, the way roads can pose a danger to us all, the way roads become a symbol of a faith on the move."

Some strange things happen on this road, of course, that deserve attention.

That these two were going to Emmaus: it's strange that Luke should mention this so specifically, so clearly, because nothing else happens in Emmaus according to the Bible. This place

is neither the setting for anything significant nor even known as an actual place. People have supposed it might be any number of actual towns, and the word sounds of “warm spring,” so maybe it was a village near a warm spring...? We don’t know. It vanishes from our awareness just as Jesus now risen vanished from their sight later on.

Another detail named though otherwise unknown is who these two people are. One is named: Cleopas. The other is not. But in both cases these men aren’t known to have featured anywhere else in the story of Jesus’ life and the movement he gathered. They were “of the group” of those who followed Jesus. This, they say in explaining that some women of their group astounded everyone: having witnessed the empty tomb, these women returned to the group to tell everyone that Jesus was alive. Otherwise, these two, Cleopas and the other one, don’t seem to feature much at all, until this moment of moments, when they were on the road.

Who were they, and where were they going, and why?

Let’s suppose.

They were on their way back home. These two unknown disciples heading to an unknown place: it might well be that they were heading back to where they’d come from, and because the movement they’d been on had come to an end, had moreover come to nothing. Though Jesus of Nazareth had seemed a “prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,” he was regardless handed over by the leaders of their people to the leaders of the empire, the local authorities, and was condemned to death and crucified.

And they had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...

Are there sadder words in the gospel narrative that these? “We had hoped...”

So, now they would head back to where they’d come from.

Can you even do that though?

Reminds me, the other day on Twitter someone was trying to get a game going. This happens a lot on Twitter. A question asked for no reason but to get a thread going or a little something trending. “Can you remember your childhood phone number?”

“Of course, I can,” I thought, though not playing along. Of course, I can remember my childhood phone number. It just ceased to be the number I’d call to reach my mother a couple months ago. She just, a couple months ago, along with her husband Buzz, moved out of my childhood home to a retirement community. And God bless that move! I love not worrying about

her, neither now, in this time of Coronavirus, nor in time to come when causes for worry might compound themselves.

But, (603) 964-5798: it had been a lovely home. A post-war saltbox, small but high-built, modestly set into a hillside, there was a grace about it, something stately though also quaint. There I shared a bedroom with my sister, stayed up late with homework, posed for graduation pictures in the backyard, first hers, then mine. There, I moved back home after a first try of moving out and attempting adulthood, a few months after my dad left, when Mom and I were both feeling pretty defeated. There we buried one dog and welcomed in a couple more. There was a swimming pool we hardly used but would have cost more to fill in than to maintain. There were hardwood trees that grew into towers over our time there, and leafy trees that traveled the merry-go-round of the seasons, filling out in the spring, whispering in a summer breeze, rustling in the fall, and denuded through the winter so the highway beyond was even more audible, though still a faint howl.

When Mom and Buzz put it on the market, I had thoughts of buying it, which I'd had over the years from time to time. Can I let this go? Can I let go the real wood paneling of my first bedroom and the wild wallpaper of the room that would become my bedroom when I'd moved back? Can I let go the skylight that we finally got not to leak in rain? Can I let go the saltbox frame that disallowed any possible addition because it would ruin the roofline, thus making the house ever too small, its rooms all a little too small—which I like in a house, a tight hold. Can I let this go?

But then I'd have to ask, could I move back? Because one thing I don't want is two homes. So, could I move back—to say nothing of having my family come along? Because that's what it would feel like, moving back.

Now, I'm no daredevil. I'm no pioneer. But one thing I can't do in life is move back. My moving forward might be slow and cautious and far from daring, but, after that early move back, I realize I'll never be able to do that again.

I think it's a God-thing.

There's a whole body of theological thinking that I just discovered, which I'm embarrassed to admit, given that it's one of the earliest strains of theological thought. No, it's better to consider it one of the earliest strains of imagining and being within the church. Just so, it's embarrassing to

admit I've only just become aware of it, only just begun reading from within its library, ancient though it is.

It flows from a supposition well summed up in the 4th century, when Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." He was one of the patriarchs of the Eastern Church, which then would have simply been considered the Church. (The Great Schism that separated East from West once and for all came in 1054, though the roots of that schism were there from the first.) For such as these, the main event of salvation and divination isn't the crucifixion, but is the incarnation—that is, the whole story of Christ, deigning from eternity to enter time and becoming incarnate, living among as one of us and even taking on death at the hands of the powers and principalities of the world, then moving past this most blinding veil, this hard-and-fast horizon past which we imagine only with frightened unknowing and through which we pass only in pain and dread, past this into renewed eternal being.

The Western Church considered it otherwise, at least in emphasis if not exclusively. Perhaps especially in its protestant forms, though also in Roman Catholicism, and less so in what's considered Celtic Catholicism, the Western Church has tended to emphasize as the saving event the crucifixion of Jesus, the "saving blood of the lamb," this most precious sacrifice. By this, we achieve atonement. By this is repaired the breach between God and the world. Even those of us who wouldn't claim so strongly that the saving event is all in the passion of Christ, it's still an emphasis that's hard to let up from.

I even remember a professor in divinity school posing the question to the lecture hall full of eager do-gooding students. "What's the most important aspect of the Christ event, the incarnation or the crucifixion?" We half who supposed, "The incarnation," were shocked at that other half who asserted, "The crucifixion."

Even still, we were all Westerners.

The Eastern Church, though, had long settled that argument, or had never really had that argument. They never insisted upon the cross as the ultimate place of salvation, over and against the whole life of Jesus as the eternal Christ entered into time. They'd never thought otherwise. (Thus, the Great Schism a millennium hence when Rome finally went one way and Constantinople went the other.) No, in the East—rooted in Constantinople and spanning out into

vast territories, Greece and eastbound into the Middle East, the Balkan peninsula and northbound including all Russia, southward into northern and even central East Africa—there's a more explicit insistence that the whole life of Christ is the saving event, the introduction into history a process of divinization, a journey of theopoesis, which reaches its apotheosis in the life of Christ, in whom was present most absolutely the nature of God in all God's love, but which is also to be the aim of all living things.

We are all to journey toward divinization—each of us and all of us, for what would a whole and perfected creation be, new and full, if not full of us all?

There is however human freedom to take into account, which would have us know we could refuse it, we could turn away and insist upon not-love. Love, though: pure, divine, creative, redemptive love: it's really hard to turn away from that. I wouldn't even bother trying.

We are all—that is, all creation and each of its abundant holymorphic parts (matter and form)—to move toward becoming God.

I admit, this sounds almost heretical. After all, isn't this the very hubris that got us into such trouble in the first place? At least that seems to be the case according to that originating story—the garden, the two first people, the God who said, “Of this tree, you shall not eat...” and the serpent who said, “God knows if you eat if it you shall become like God.” Isn't the implication, then, that God doesn't mean for us to become like God?

But, wait—for wasn't it the serpent who suggested this? And why should we believe that guy? The story even tells us, right up front, the serpent was the craftiest creature in all the garden, a deceiver from the start, misguiding as if by nature?

So, maybe God does mean for us to become like God. Maybe God is being whose nature and aim are for us to become full of such being. Maybe God is pure creative love whose will and appeal are for us to become pure creative love, and whose way is Christ by whom we might so become.

Maybe, says the American, this modern creature with her hobbled imagination and ambivalent, relativistic will. According to Eastern patristics, though, and continuing on into recent Eastern praxis, this journey isn't one of ambivalence but inspiration and even blessed urgency, and it involves *katharsis*, *theoria*, and *theosis*.

Catharsis is clarifying, purifying, or cleansing—a getting rid of all that hobbles the journey to God, a shedding of all that misguides, distracts, causes to stumble. A letting go of all the things that are not love and that deny love, a letting go of all that demystifies and disenchants regarding the mystery of being, all that secularizes the wonder of existence, all that mocks the awe which fills the creation, all that commodifies creativity making clutter, making trash.

Catharsis: we have to be careful with this powerful urge because our capacity to discern what gives life and what denies it is famously confused. So perhaps it's better to imagine this as process in which we participate rather one of which we take charge.

(The middle voice: remember, a lot of Eastern languages still feature the middle voice, that third way that isn't the active voice in which there is one clear agent making the thing happen, and isn't the passive voice in which things seem just to happen without any agent or mover of things. The middle voice has us active in a larger process, suggests agents whose activity is participation more than causation. The middle voice seems to remember the possibility of God as active in creation, an unmoved mover. The English language has largely lost the middle voice. Many Eastern languages retain it.)

Theoria, that is contemplation and illumination, a looking and seeing and coming to know a knowledge of reality itself. This is gnosis, which is no mere cognition, an abstract, notional sort of knowing, but is full recognition, a full embrace from the heart as much as the head, from the mind and imagination as from the narrower faculties of reason and rationale.

Theoria: we have to be careful with this yearning because our capacity to justify ourselves is great. Our ability to close our minds to all but our own self-affirmation is famously powerful and famously misguiding. Our will wends its way into seemingly everything we attempt. So perhaps it's better to think of this as a process in the undergoing of which we participate rather than one of which we take charge.

(Remember the middle voice.)

Theosis is fullness of God or union with God. It is the aim of this life-long journey of faith, a process that takes a lifetime to traverse and participate in. Apotheosis is its most absolute manifestation: it is indeed Christ.

See, with this, there's hardly a moment of transformation; there's more a momentous pilgrimage from matter to spirit, from non-being to being to being-in-God who is absolute being. It is a grand becoming.

A be-coming: do you remember? Do you remember that Jesus is described as the one who is coming? His friend, Mary (or was it Martha?) described the Messiah as the one who is coming?

Do you also remember that he described himself as one who has gone ahead—to prepare a place for us, to meet us up ahead while we are on the way?

And did you notice that these two men on the road back to where they'd come from were kept from seeing, but did at last see, did at last recognize this one in whose company they'd been all along? They recognized him in the breaking of the bread, this most familiar gesture, this most blessed act. Jesus would break the bread, would identify himself with and within the bread, and would urge his followers to eat the bread which is to take into their bodies the very substance of God, to take into *our* bodies the very substance of God. And by this they would *recognize* him; by this, we might *recognize* him—no mere cognition, but full recognition.

And with this he would vanish from their sight. But he wouldn't vanish from their knowledge. He vanished but didn't remove himself from their gnosis, their recognition. What's more, for this recognition and for this taking into their bodies the very substance of God, these two would head right back out to Jerusalem, would strike right back out on the way from which they'd retreated, from which they'd maybe even fled. They would strike right back out to return to Jerusalem, to find the eleven and all their companions so to tell them, "The Lord has risen indeed."

It's as if his vanishing was to inspire them on.

"I have gone ahead of you," is the implication of his coming and his vanishing. "Come and see," is the urging invitation of his coming to our be-coming.

There are times these days when I repose in time as if it's substance. I have so much of it, and with so little accountability: how I spend it is really, often up to me. No one's holding me to task—and because these days there are no real tasks for many of us other than staying at home. But I'm used to being busy, as maybe you are. I'm used to having to get my kids to school and then myself to meetings and then to the grocery store for milk and then the dogs out to a walk lest they

climb the walls of the house. These days, though, I feel time as if it's substantive, as if I might repose in it like a hammock that swings gently in the mystery of existence.

I like it, and I don't.

I miss my life, and I don't—or at least not all of it.

I wonder if we're in a moment of catharsis. I wonder if this time out of time, this time of weird societal suspension, might be as a moment of catharsis, as when those two dispirited disciples were heading back home: "And we had hoped..." For this, it isn't easy. It isn't easy, or happy-making, to recognize that, while much of all that filled our society's busy busyness was life-giving, much of it was also myth, a holding up of its own importance, a deception which we'd all collectively come to believe even if each of us had our moments of resistance, moments of truth.

I wonder if we might also take this as a time of contemplation, illumination, recognition. I wonder if it's a good time for wonder, both in its suggesting awe and in its suggesting unknowing. Might we look out to see in the splendor of creation carrying on largely without us—sun up, sun down, with no effort from any of us? Might we, while staying home and sitting right where we are, also emerge into the mystery of existence that outpaces our will toward it or conquest of it?

This time of sheltering in place might seem like a strange time to strike out on a journey. But as it is a journey from matter to spirit, it might be just the thing.

Thanks be to God.