

Finding Our Footing

April 28, 2021

Luke 24:36b-48

The story from our scripture takes place on Easter Sunday. The eleven disciples are in Jerusalem processing all the events that have taken place. Two friends arrive to tell about the stranger they met on the road to Emmaus. Their hearts burned as he was talking. They invited him home for dinner. As the stranger broke bread at dinner, they recognized him as the risen Christ. But Jesus vanished from their sight. They hasten to tell the others about this appearance of the risen Christ.

While sharing, Jesus appears among them, saying, "Peace be with you." The disciples are terrified and afraid, spooked as if a ghost is haunting them. It seems that Jesus is a bit impatient with the disciples. They have always had a hard time understanding his message and meaning. Now the most wondrous act of God has transpired, and they still don't get it. Jesus asks, "Why are you startled? Why are you doubtful?"

It is easy to empathize with the disciples. They've been on a roller coaster of events and emotions for at least a week or more. On Palm Sunday they heralded Jesus as their Messiah and Savior, expecting him to end the oppressive reign of the Romans. Instead, by the end of the week, the Romans had ended Jesus' life. In five short days their ecstasy turned to agony. The beloved Teacher and Lord was suddenly gone. The disciples felt abandoned, disillusioned, confused. The man in whom they had placed their hopes didn't even fight for his life; he gave in to those who violently executed him because he was a threat. The disciples had grown to love Jesus, for he drew them close to God. But when he died, they wondered if they had been fooled. Now here he is again and they don't know what to think or believe.

Through the trauma of Holy Week the disciples lost their footing. That which they thought was secure was stolen from them. Hopes and dreams for a commonwealth of peace and justice under Jesus' leadership were shattered.

The experience of the disciples mirrors three phases of transition taught by Dr. William Bridges. It starts with an ending, the loss of something or someone familiar. The ending signals a need to let go of old ways and an old identity. The ending experienced by the disciples was Jesus' death.

The next phase is an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational. It is called "the neutral zone." It is "a psychological no-man's-land between the old reality and the new one. It is the limbo between the old sense of

identity and a new identity....The old way of doing things is gone but the new way doesn't feel comfortable yet."ⁱ

From Good Friday through Holy Saturday, the followers of Jesus are in a neutral zone. Their leader has disappeared and they've lost their footing. The road they thought they were following crumbled. Going back to the homes they left to follow Jesus doesn't feel quite right, for they developed new patterns and behaviors while Jesus was alive. They're unclear about their future and their identity. They had invested their lives as followers of Jesus, but with his death, can they still follow him or should they find someone else to follow or should they take leadership? It is confusing, overwhelming, and frightening. But it is also an opportunity to be creative, to grow into what Jesus taught them to be, and to renew or even reinvent themselves. Once they get through the shock of loss and begin to find their footing, the neutral zone can be a time for innovation and revitalization.

The third phase of transitions is a new beginning. It is not simply a change in practical and situational circumstances. A new organizational chart may be put on the wall so people know their new roles, their new boss, and their new team members. People start operating according to the new structure, but it is just a situational change, leaving them in the neutral zone feeling lost, confused, and uncertain. The beginning takes place only after they've come through the wilderness and are ready to make the emotional commitment to do things the new way and see themselves as new people. Beginnings involve new understandings, new values, fresh attitudes, and new identities. The timing of beginnings is not set by dates on a schedule. Beginnings follow the timing of the mind and heart.ⁱⁱ

On Easter Sunday when the disciples encounter the risen Christ, it appears to be the end of the neutral zone and a new beginning with Jesus. But a mixture of feelings are experienced: terror, fear, startled, doubt, wonder, questioning, happiness. The events of the previous 48 hours do not anticipate Jesus' resurrection. Now they have another experience to process and absorb. Jesus gives them a moment to take it all in. He says, "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in two days. What do you have to eat?" While he is snacking on a piece of broiled fish, the disciples stand in astonishment.

Jesus helps them regain their footing. He reminds them of his teachings about the Hebrew scriptures and even about the course of his life, death, and rising. He has completed that process, and he commissions them as witnesses to tell his story and preach about the change of heart and life that leads to forgiveness of sin, release from bondage to sin. He promises that the Holy Spirit will come to empower and guide them.

Jesus offers them a pattern for their new beginning. Their new role is to be witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus throughout the world. Knowing

the rest of story, we know that the disciples accepted Jesus' new commission, and 2,000 years later we are the beneficiaries of their new beginning.

Aren't we grateful that the disciples took on the mantle of witnessing to their faith in God as revealed through the ministry of Jesus Christ? The disciples fostered a legacy that has endured through countless generations. Back then in the first century, they could not imagine the ways in which the Christian faith beyond the Mediterranean world to what we now know as Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. They could not dream of the grand cathedrals built to the glory of God, the stunning artwork that would tell the stories of scripture, and the unique expressions of the Christian community over the centuries.

Leadership expert Jim Rohn said, "All good men and women must take responsibility to create legacies that will take the next generation to a level we could only imagine." The original disciples of Jesus took seriously their responsibility to witness to the transforming presence of Christ in their lives. They were enthusiastic about sharing the opportunity for transformation with others. Fortunately, that legacy has continued to the twenty-first century so that we can partake of the good news of God's amazing grace and unconditional love expressed most fully in Jesus Christ.

In his latest book, David Brooks uses a two-mountain metaphor to illustrate two different moral ethos by which people can live – a life lived for self and a life lived as a gift for others. His thesis is that the first mode, a life lived for self, which is common in our culture, doesn't satisfy. People who live with a second-mountain mentality, life lived as a gift for others, are deeply fulfilled.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second-mountain ethos says that the main activity of life is giving. Human beings are at their best are givers of gifts. On the first mountain, a person makes individual choices and keeps their options open. The second mountain is about making commitments...and giving oneself away. It is about surrendering the self.^{iv}

We hear echoes of Jesus' teachings in this two-mountain metaphor. Surrendering the self, giving oneself away is the nature of the Christian life. It is the way that we continue the legacy of the Christian faith, by thinking less of ourselves, and more of others; by considering the future ministry of the Christian community, not simply the present, which serves my needs.

As the church steps out of the neutral zone of the covid-19 shelter in place, we have the opportunity to foster a legacy beyond our personal needs. As this congregation considers its future in significant decisions, we have the opportunity to continue a legacy that will reach far into this century, well beyond our own lives.

Like the original disciples, we are called to be witnesses and to spend our energies and resources in ways that build upon the legacy we have inherited. May we have the

bold vision to think beyond ourselves far into the future, a future in which the world will thirst for the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Eternal Presence, we rejoice in your great desire to be one with us, to accompany us in this journey of life, with its smooth paths, deep valleys, winding roads, steep climbs, & mountaintop experiences. Wherever we find ourselves, you are there. Now in a moment of silence, we share with You where we are on our journey & invite your presence with us....

Come alongside us, O God, to assist us in navigating the challenges of life. When we face endings, grant us courage to let go of what is necessary. Make us patient and gentle w ourselves and one another as we float through uncertainty. In your time, guide us beyond to a new beginning filled with new life, meaningful experiences, and deep joy.

Abide w all moving thru life changes in employment, housing, health, and relationships. Enter in with your peaceful presence and guide them thru the rivers of change to healthy beginnings.

We pray for the Minneapolis area as it grieves the death of Daunte Wright, George Floyd, and so many others. Guide us toward nonviolent ways of dealing with difficulties.

Abide w persons who are unsheltered, offering protection and leading them to safety. Grant them resilience to cope with ongoing challenges of uncertainty.

Be present to all who are coping with illness, offering the healing touch of Christ. May breath of the Holy Spirit sustain those fighting covid-19. Replenish health professionals and scientists battling the coronavirus.

May your gentle peace comfort those transitioning to eternal life with You. Hold them and their families in your loving care.

Grant us wisdom as society moves to reopen, that we might continue to do what is best for the health of all.

Empower us to be faithful witnesses to the love and grace we have experienced from you. Guide us to leave a legacy that inspires others to claim faith in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), p. 8.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 57-58.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), p. xviii.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 53.