

April 19, 2026
Luke 24:13-35

Easter 3
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“Purposeful Travel”

“Now that same hour two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and taking with each other about all these things that had happened.”

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

It is a question we are asked every time we cross the border, the customs officer inquiring as to why we are traveling to the USA. Even though we carry American passports, the officers still ask about our destination and the purpose of our visit. We have never had any problems, since our visits are usually for vacation, visiting with family and friends, or attending events at my seminary; but before we are allowed to continue our journey we have to give a reason why we are entering the country and the purpose of our travels on that occasion.

While no one asks this question when we are not crossing an international border, it is true that most of our travels away from home have a purpose. My day off is usually devoted to running errands, so when I set out from home I do so with the purpose of grocery shopping, picking up cat food, going to the bank, getting my hair cut, and other necessary tasks. When I set out from my office on a weekday afternoon, it is usually for the purpose of visiting parishioners in hospitals and long-term care facilities, or for leading worship in local retirement homes, or bringing communion to one of our homebound members. Since November, I have been making regular trips to London for the purpose of donating blood platelets at Canadian Blood Services, since it was discovered that I have a high platelet count and my platelets can be very useful for patients battling leukemia. No matter if it is a trip that remains within Stratford or takes me far from home, most of my travels have a clear purpose and destination in mind.

But there have been rare occasions when I set out on a journey with no clear destination in mind. It might be a nice day, and I decided to get in the car and see where it takes me. It might be a time when life has become stressful and a drive in the country may be the tonic that will clear my mind and help me feel better. There have been times when I find myself driving by “muscle memory,” my mind being so preoccupied that my body almost steers the car by itself. Such “purposeless

travel” can at times be exciting when we find ourselves in new and wonderful places, but it can also be occasions where we need to escape our current circumstances and any other place is preferable; in this case, *“if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.”*

The travelers in today’s Gospel lesson appear to be engaging in such “purposeless travel.” In one sense, they are returning to their hometown of Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. Returning home is one of the most popular purposes for travel; we return home to celebrate holidays and special occasions, to visit with family and friends, and at times to be with one another when a loved one has died. But there appears to be no purpose to the journey these two persons are making on this day; they are getting out of Jerusalem and may be walking by “muscle memory” back to a familiar place. We are told by Luke that *“on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.”* (24:13-14). The day to which the Evangelist is referring is the first Easter Sunday, when the women who had witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion and burial *“came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared”* (24:1) so that they might complete the burial customs for Jesus. But when they arrive at the tomb, they are startled to discover that the stone has been rolled away, and the body of Jesus is not where it had been laid. At first the women are perplexed, but when *“suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them”* (24:4) the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, a common reaction when one comes into the presence of heavenly beings (*“Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified”* – 2:9). But the message the angelic beings bring them is one that is not meant to spark fear but joy: *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”* (24:5). After experiencing this angelic appearance and the announcement of the resurrection of Jesus, the women return from the tomb and *“told this to the eleven and to all the rest”* (24:9). At first, the followers of Jesus do not believe the women; Peter takes the initiative of visiting the tomb and confirming that it is empty, and leaves *“amazed at what had happened”* (24:12) – but so far no one has come into the presence of the risen Lord.

It is here that today’s Gospel continues the story as two of the *“all the rest”* of Jesus’ followers begin their journey out of Jerusalem back to Emmaus, a purposeless journey that is meant solely to put the horrors of what has happened in the Holy City behind them. The Evangelist tells us that they are so engrossed in their conversation that they hardly notice another traveler who has joined them; Luke tells us that it is *“Jesus himself [who] came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from*

recognizing him” (24:15-16). It may seem strange to us that these disciples who had been in close proximity to Jesus for so long would not recognize him on the road, but it is possible that they were so weighed down with grief after the crucifixion that they could not even imagine that death was not the end for Jesus. When Jesus interrupts their conversation by asking, “*what are you discussing with each other while you walk along?*” (24:17), the disciples “*stood still, looking sad.*” Finally one of the travelers, who is identified as Cleopas, answers Jesus’ question, amazed that anyone would not know what had happened in Jerusalem on that dark Friday: “*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?*” (24:18). A “stranger” (*paroikos*) was a migrant, a resident foreigner, someone who comes from another place; Cleopas assumes that the man traveling with him must be someone who comes from another place, because why else would he be unaware of the events of the past few days? The irony of Cleopas’ question is that whereas he assumes that Jesus is the only one who does not know about “*the things that have taken place in these days,*” Jesus is truly the only one who does know the full meaning of all that has happened; “*the two disciples assume they know much more about what has happened than does this stranger.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Rather than revealing his identity to these arrogant travelers, Jesus feigns ignorance, asking “*what things?*” (24:19). The disciples’ response indicates that they do not understand what has occurred, the meaning of what happened in the city they have left behind. Their confession regarding “*the things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people*” evokes early confessions that identify Jesus as a prophet (“*Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen among us!’ and ‘God has looked favourably upon his people!’*” – 7:16). After giving an accurate account of the passion narrative in which “*our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him*” (24:20), Cleopas turns next to the response of the disciples and the report of the women who “*came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive*” (24:23). But the report of the women and the empty tomb does not dissuade Cleopas from his disappointment that “*we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel*” (24:21), echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah (“*Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.*” – Isaiah 43:14). Cleopas and his fellow traveler had hoped that Jesus would fulfill this promise of a Redeemer who would defeat Israel’s enemies but saw his death – which was indeed the fulfillment of God’s promises – as only the frustration of their hope.

Again there is irony: the two were confused because Peter had not seen Jesus at the tomb, but now they have seen the risen Lord and still they do not understand.

When Jesus finally responds, at first he chastises these disciples for failing to understand what had been revealed to them by the prophets and fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection: "*Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!*" (24:25). The revelation of the Easter reality begins with the fulfillment of the Scriptures that proclaimed that it was "*necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory*" (25:26); the Gospel of Jesus Christ continues and brings to fulfillment the Law, the prophets, and the writings of the Old Testament. Those who do not see this fulfillment are "foolish" and "slow of heart to believe," words that Paul would use to speak of the Gospel that was often received as "foolishness" in his generation:

- "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe." – 1 Corinthians 1:18-21.

The suffering of the Messiah was necessary in God's plan for the salvation of humanity, a fulfillment that consisted not only in Jesus' suffering but also in his entering "*into his glory*" (24:26). Jesus' summary continues the emphasis of the importance of Scripture in all that had happened: "*Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures*" (24:27), a reference to the writings of the Old Testament that speak of the Messiah that confirm that "*Christ is the fulfillment to which all Scripture points.*" (Culpepper).

When the travelers approach Emmaus, Jesus "*walked ahead as if he were going on*" (24:28), but out of habit the two disciples urge him to "*stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over*" (24:29). Hospitality was central in the culture of that time and place, evidenced in the scene in Genesis where Abraham offers hospitality to strangers who are revealed as the manifestation of the presence of the Lord who announces to the host that "*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son*" (Genesis 18:10). Jesus had earlier accepted the hospitality of Zacchaeus ("*Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham*" – Luke 19:9); and the letter to the Hebrews encourages followers of Jesus to "*not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*" (Hebrews 13:2). Jesus accepts

their hospitality, and soon they are at the dinner table where the hosts give their honoured guest the privilege of offering the *hamotzi*, the traditional Jewish blessing at the beginning of a meal with bread: “*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*” (24:30). It is at this precise moment that an *anagnorisis*, a recognition scene, takes place as “*their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight*” (24:31). While the meal is not necessarily a eucharistic meal (no wine is mentioned as at the Last Supper), it serves as a reminder that “*every meal has the potential of being an event in which hospitality and table fellowship can become sacred occasions*” (Culpepper). Their eyes having been opened so that they now understand who was traveling and broke bread with them, the disciples ask 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?*” (24:32). In their remembrance of what they have experienced, “*the nonseriousness of rehearsal and the busyness of the event give way to recognition, realization, and understanding.*” (Fred Craddock).

Having come to Emmaus on a purposeless journey that was meant to get them away from Jerusalem and what they assumed was the tragedy of Jesus and the death of their messianic hopes, the disciples now retrace their steps and make a purposeful journey back to the Holy City: “*That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together*” (24:33). Before they can relate the appearance of the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, however, the gathered assembly who remained in Jerusalem share the good news that “*the Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!*” (24:34), an appearance that Paul also reports in 1 Corinthians:

- For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

The report of the appearance to Peter authorizes his role as the leader of the apostles in Acts and prepares for the appearance of the risen Lord to the eleven that follows, where Jesus commissions them to continue his mission so that “*repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things*” (24:47-48).

It is only after they hear of the appearance of the risen Lord to Peter that the disciples get the chance to share their experience of “*what had happened on the road*”

(24:35), how the risen Lord had been made known to them in the interpretation of Scripture and in “*the breaking of the bread.*” Their purposeful journey back to Jerusalem is the beginning of the purposeful journey to which Jesus calls all his disciples as they are commissioned to bring the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ to all people; they are “sent forth” as apostles to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

- “The experience of the presence of God is not a private gift. It is never for us alone. Neither in the discovery of the empty tomb nor in the discovery of the identity of the flower traveler is there the familiar command to go and tell that is typical of other resurrection appearance scenes. Nevertheless, both the recipients of the revelation immediately and spontaneously return from the liminal tomb and table to share their experience joyfully with others.” – Culpepper.

The good news of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us that no matter where we may find ourselves or where our journeys may take us, our sojourns are never purposeless because we walk every day in the assurance that our Lord is risen indeed, and because he lives we walk each day in the comfort of a holy and certain hope. Even when we find ourselves walking through dark and dangerous places – even the proverbial “*valley of the shadow of death*” – we do not fear, or despair, or accept that our lives have no purpose because our Lord is with us, walking each step alongside us, comforting and strengthening us with the good news of Christ’s resurrection and the fact that all of our actions and deeds have purpose because we walk as children of the light of Christ.

- “The greatest miracle that Christianity has to proclaim is that the love that suffered agonies on that hill outside the city walls was the love of God himself, the love of God for his creation, which is a love that has no limit, not even the limit of death. And for us the meaning of that love is that we can now raise our own shrill voices from the hills of our own suffering and say some such words as these: ‘The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!’” – Frederick Buechner.

What is the purpose of your trip?

As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the good news that Jesus walks with us “*all along my pilgrim journey*” (ELW Hymn 325), we know that wherever we find ourselves or wherever we might travel that our journeys as

children of God are always purposeful journeys as we follow the example of the two disciples who traveled back to Jerusalem so that they might fulfill the purpose of the disciples of Christ in every generation to fulfill our mission to serve “*in full obedience to our Lord: to care for all without reserve, and spread his liberating word!*” (ELW Hymn 729).

May all our journeys as the people of God be purposeful journeys in sharing the good news of the one who walks with us always with the light and life of our risen Lord and Saviour!

Amen.