

On the Road
April 19, 2026
Luke 24:13-35

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A few years ago, I was talking to one of my colleagues about his time as an intentional interim minister. At this point he was retired so he had years of experience in various settings. One of the things he said had to do with the model we have of a short interim period of searching, questioning, deconstructing, reconstructing followed by a longer, “normal”, “settled” period. He wasn’t convinced that it was the best way to think of church life. He thought that that challenging interim work should be done throughout a church’s life. It sounded to me like he was describing a constant, steady journey of self-reflection and redirection rather than an interim sprint before a long season of “settling in”. I’m reminded of the line from the song “We Are the Church” that goes “the church is not a resting place”. Reflecting on the way Jesus called the early church, New Testament scholar Eric Barreto writes, “This will be a church on the move.”

Barreto came to that idea by recognizing that much of Jesus’ ministry, especially in Luke’s gospel, happened while Jesus was on the move, while he was on the road. Today’s gospel lesson is one of many examples of Jesus’ ministry on the road. Cleopas and his companion, perhaps his wife, are leaving Jerusalem defeated and despondent three days after the traumatic event of Jesus’ public execution. They are talking to each other about everything that has happened. I wonder if their gait and speech is slow with despair, or frantic with fear. Either would be understandable following the torture and death of their leader at the hands of a brutal ruling body whose power does not seem dimmed in the slightest by all that Jesus had said and done.

That is when the risen Jesus appears to them, though he is not yet revealed to them. Perhaps it seems like he is another traveler walking at a quicker pace and he catches up with the couple. He asks them what they are talking about. And they are so stunned they stop in their tracks. “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?” The Greek word translated as visitor or stranger in most English versions can be more accurately translated as migrant or resident alien. Jesus appears to the travelers as an immigrant. Cleopas brings this immigrant Jesus up to speed and says, “We had hoped he was the one who would redeem Israel.” We had hoped. A hope that was and is no more. The Messiah, according to common belief at that time, was supposed to be a king like David who would kick the goliath Rome out of Jerusalem and give them a taste of their own medicine. A king who would wield violent

might greater than the violent might of their oppressors. That is how the people thought Israel would be redeemed. No wonder they are disappointed. No wonder they can't recognize that king as a lone immigrant on a back road heading away from all the action. They still don't recognize him, even when he teaches them knowledgeably about all the prophets from Moses onward.

But Cleopas and his companion are faithful Jews, so they invite this foreigner to eat with them because, as they had been taught, their own people were once foreigners in Egypt. And so, Jesus sits at the table with them. And then he takes the bread. He blesses it. He breaks it. And he offers it to them. That does it. Maybe post Resurrection Jesus does not have the same voice or facial features or mannerisms as he did before his death. But he is known to his people clear as day in the breaking of bread. And then he disappears. I don't know why he keeps doing that. It's very frustrating. But it gives Cleopas and his companion time to reflect and they say to each other, "Weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road?" They had some kind of sense when they encountered Jesus, but they did not heed it. I wonder if it wasn't God that kept them from recognizing Jesus on the road, but their own expectations of what Jesus should be like or the debilitating despair that comes with clinging to expectations that do not match reality. Regardless, their hope has returned. And it spurs them back to Jerusalem, back to their community, where they will celebrate and continue to spread the radical word that hope is alive.

And it all started on the road when Cleopas and his companion least expected it. Not only had they not expected it, they had lost hope for it. They were ready to admit defeat and settle back into their pre-Jesus lives. They had an encounter that their despair and expectations kept them from fully recognizing. And even after the Resurrection was revealed to them, Rome was still in power. Jesus' disciples were still imprisoned and executed. Biblical preaching professor Karoline Lewis dared to claim that the Resurrection didn't solve everything. It was not a one-and-done deal. I know it's cliched, but you could say that Resurrection is more about the journey than the destination. It is more about a way of living and searching and moving through the world today than it is about an event that happened 2,000 years ago.

And so, I think about the idea of a church on the move. These days there is a lot of anxiety about the decline in church affiliation and worship attendance. And our expectations of the future church are often based on what we have seen in the past: full pews on Sunday mornings, full boards and committees, familiar and comfortable routines and rituals. And I wonder if our fatigue comes partly from trying to make old expectations fit a new world. Like the disciples, we find it hard to imagine a new way. We think the church will survive if we do the same things but try harder. And that is an exhausting exercise. No

wonder we're worn out and still anxious about the future. No wonder we'd like a silver bullet, a magic pill. We may think that'll be the right long-term pastor, new membership, a cure-all strategy we can learn from a workshop or webinar. All those things can help, certainly. But if we think of any of those things as destinations, if we look forward to a time when we can say, "We've figured it out," or "We've made it," then we're in trouble. If we think we're settled, we're in trouble. Those are not destinations; they are points along the ongoing journey. I wonder what new ways we will discover together on this journey. I wonder, when we've dared to let go of our expectations, when we've dared to hope, how the Resurrection will be revealed to Center Harbor Congregational Church. The other bit of hope I glean from today's gospel lesson is that even though Cleopas and his companion don't recognize Jesus at first, even though Jesus disappears as soon as they do, it's not too late to act. They change direction. They proclaim the good news. They do not settle. They get a move on and keep practicing the Resurrection.