

November 13, 2016

TEXT: Luke 24:13–28 (29–35)

TITLE: We Must Walk Forward

By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I'm not going to say a lot this morning. I'm tired of words, as I imagine you are too. The pre-election punditry, the relentless election ads, and the post-election autopsies of the past few days have worn me out. I have spent more time listening to classical music on WQED than commentators on NPR.

I'm also tired of numbers. In the hours that have elapsed since a very long Tuesday turned into an uncomfortable and sad Wednesday, number-crunchers have been busy. We've been told that about 57% of eligible voters cast a ballot, which means 43% of Americans did not vote. We're told that for the fifth time in American history, a candidate won the popular vote but lost the electoral vote. We're told that if just one voter in every hundred had shifted his or her vote, the entire outcome would have been different (Nate Silver). But what does not need to be quantified in numbers is the sad reality that we are living in a divided nation—that Allegheny County voted drastically different than any of the counties around us and how painfully divided many families across America are feeling, even to point of causing plans for Thanksgiving reunions to be re-considered.

For others, this is not a time of grief but a time of celebration. In some very sad ways across America, it's been a time of gloating, of abusive words, of hateful triumphant threats. Now, if we're honest, we know that large parts of America were just as disappointed with the election results in 2008 and 2012. The divide in our country is not new. But what is fundamentally troubling is to recognize that the tone and the content of this Presidential election was not an aberration. Donald Trump's words and rhetoric were a mirror reflecting back what has always been present in America—the racism, misogyny, fear of the immigrant, the prideful “me-first, others-last” libertarianism. Thankfully, those are not the only sentiments present in our nation. We remain a nation of resilience, creativity, of backbone, passion, and yes, of faith. The question is what do we do now?

When I woke up early Wednesday morning, I thought about the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. Luke describes two heavy-hearted disciples—possibly a man and a woman, a husband and wife—trudging seven miles down a dusty road out of Jerusalem to reach their home in Emmaus. For me, hearing the election results felt similar to how I imagine things felt in the days right after Jesus' crucifixion. The Emmaus road disciples were described as downcast in spirit, since “the one they had hoped would redeem Israel” had been killed on a cross and buried in a borrowed tomb. Yes, it's true that the sun had still risen that next day and the day after. And yes, some in their group had even spoken about a vision of Christ being alive. But on that particular day, resurrection talk was simply words that their tired brains and broken hearts couldn't yet process.

As Luke tells the story, Jesus appeared on the road and joined the two disciples, although they failed to recognize him. He spoke to them, re-focused them on the fundamentals of their faith—of God’s covenant with us going back to the dawn of creation, the call of Abraham, the promises to the people in exile, and the good news embodied in Jesus’ miracles and teaching. Oh, how I wish we had a transcript of what was shared on that day—of all that Jesus said to them, taught them, and reminded them of as they walked down that Emmaus road.

But the verse that fascinates me is verse 28, the verse I ended with: *As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus walked ahead as if he were going on.* Seriously? Where is Jesus going? Why would he be leaving those two disciples? Initially it sounds like a test of faith. Jesus acted as if he was going farther to see if these disciples will show him hospitality. Well, if that was the case, then the two disciples passed the test. Vs. 29: *But they urged him strongly, saying ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’* Jesus does stay with them. And perhaps the fruit of that hospitality is seen not only in a meal they shared together, but also a fresh revelation of God’s power and victory over darkness. Vs. 30–31: *When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.* Those verses have launched a million sermons: Show hospitality and kindness; share what you have; gather around the table of the Lord, and your eyes will be opened and the good news of resurrection will live forever in your hearts. Yes, that’s a great message.

But the question still remains from vs. 28—Why was Jesus walking ahead as if he were going farther down the road? Then I realized—the patterns of ministry are different with the resurrected Christ as opposed to Jesus of Nazareth. In his earthly ministry, Jesus routinely went where the people were. He gathered and preached in the synagogue. He walked through the villages and sat and taught in their midst. He went to Jerusalem for the festivals and proclaimed the gospel amid the crowd of fellow pilgrims. He stayed right with them. But after Easter, Jesus almost always walked ahead, telling people to catch up to where he was.

Granted, on Easter morning itself, Jesus needed to break into a room with closed doors to tell the disciples to stop living in fear. But in most of the other resurrection stories, Jesus walked ahead of folks. In Matthew and Mark’s gospels, the angel gave the women at the tomb the message that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee and they would see him there. In John’s gospel, Jesus didn’t appear in the tomb where Mary Magdalene was looking for him, but he went ahead of her, waiting in the garden where she would travel as soon as she left the tomb. And later, when the disciples were out fishing, the risen Christ appeared on the shoreline and called out to them. When they reached him, they found him there with a fire going and breakfast all ready for them. He had gone ahead of them.

The point is this: The world has been changed by the resurrection of Christ. Everything has shifted from our perspective to God's perspective—and God's perspective is always about 10 steps ahead of us, calling us forward, urging us to keep on walking.

This week has put all of us on the road to Emmaus. Thankfully, what that means is that the risen Christ still walks beside us, reassuring us and reminding us of the fundamentals of faith we may have forgotten. But it also means that he is quite prepared to keep on walking forward. If we are to follow where he leads, we must commit ourselves this very day not to stop in our tracks—or worse, to go backwards regarding what it means to be children of God; not to backtrack on what it means to be prophets of justice, what it means to be people of compassion, hospitality and moral courage, what it means to be a faithful American nation. So let me quite clear. No matter what happens around us, this church will be a place where all are welcome—where marriage equality will be celebrated and honored—where LGBTQ people can live out their faith in safety—where no woman is objectified or degraded—where poverty and racism will be named as sins and fought against as such—where people of other faiths, especially our Jewish and Muslim colleagues will be seen as siblings and never as outsiders—where immigrants seeking a home and a place to share their gifts will always be given sanctuary—and where our children, Charlotte, Joshua, Isaac, Kira and all the others will learn about the risen Christ who has promised “I will never leave or forsake you.”

Enough words for now. The risen Christ goes before us. And he means to keep on walking. We will continue to do what we've always done—publicly professing what we believe, witnessing to justice by word and deed. For our focus is on the risen One who is there just ahead. And to get to where he is, individually, collectively, nationally, we must walk forward.

AMEN