

April 26, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Luke 24:13–35](#)

TITLE: Stopping on the Road to Emmaus

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Two disciples of Jesus trudged down the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was the day after the Jewish Sabbath. Some women disciples that morning had told these disciples that they'd found Jesus' tomb empty, and Peter plus a few others had confirmed the truth of their story. But still Cleopas and a second disciple were walking away from Jerusalem and heading home. Twice, though, on their journey they stopped—once when a stranger joined them; once when they insisted that stranger stay for supper. And that stopping on the road to Emmaus made all the difference in the world.

Friends, there are lots of ways to characterize this season in which we find ourselves. We are living through a medical crisis as a viral pandemic moves around the planet. We are enduring a time of health care precautions—staying at home, keeping our distance, wearing masks for the well-being of others. We are in the midst of a time of economic disruption—of wildly fluctuating stock markets, massive unemployment and severely threatened businesses across the country. Mostly we are now confronted with a huge stop sign—halting life as usual and making us reassess how we should live together as children of God.

Stopping, taking a pause, is not automatically a bad thing. Optimists encourage us to take advantage of this time of “sheltering in place.” They tell us that there's a real value in stopping. Stopping lets us pause and remember what is most important in life. Every strong tree needs deep roots; and every strong life needs to be well-grounded in what is most important. Second, stopping is a chance to catch our breath. When you momentarily stop exercising to catch your breath, you aren't abandoning the workout altogether; you're just pausing so your body will be ready for the next step in reaching your fitness goal. Stopping the frantic pace of life to catch our breath is often just what we need to be prepared for the journey ahead. And third, stopping for a while allows us to look back over where we've been and evaluate whether we are on the right path forward. We speak about how sailors at sea regularly take their bearings to make sure they're heading in the right direction. When we stop, look around, and remember where we are hoping to go, that can be a good thing.¹ A very good thing, indeed.

The first time the disciples stopped on the road to Emmaus, it was because a stranger came up to them and asked “What are you talking about while you walk along?” The next line in scripture is this: *They stood still, looking sad*. They had been talking about the death of Jesus. They were grieving his cruel crucifixion and their lost dreams, because as they later said to the stranger, “*We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.*” To borrow Langston Hughes' poetry, they possessed a “dream deferred” and it made them quite sad.

They stopped the first time basically to vent their disappointment to the stranger. There wasn't a language of Easter resurrection in their vocabulary yet. Resurrection was something they thought would come at the end of time, not right in the midst of time. Remember when Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb and told Martha that her brother would rise again? Martha's response was "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" to which Jesus replied, "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:24+) The two disciples on the road, just like Martha, focused all their energy on the past tense and the future tense—this is what we had hoped would happen, and now our hope must wait for some future day. Jesus stopped them and brought them back to the present tense. To Martha he said, *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will never die.* To the disciples Jesus said, "*Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*"

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had been talking their sad talk for miles before Jesus stopped them. If we're honest, sometimes our sad conversations can last for days, weeks, even years. We re-hash the past, second-guess what we've done, and tell ourselves over and over that what I had hoped was all for nothing. People do this; churches do this, worrying about the future and how they miss the good ol' days; Americans seem especially prone to this, talking about how our democratic system is fundamentally broken and nothing can solve the partisan logjam and divisive rhetoric of politics today.

So take a breath and realize that Christ stopping us for a while can be a good thing. Christ stops us so we can remember what grounds us—the grace and love that are the roots and soil that keep us firmly planted. Christ stops us so we can catch our breath – stop hyperventilating over the latest social media outrage or negative mindset that gives us no mental rest, and take in what the Holy Spirit offers: peace for today, hope for tomorrow. And Christ stops us so we can get our bearings. If what we've been doing and prioritizing up until now has led us to this moment—this moment of inequity in health care availability, this injustice in economic support systems—then maybe it is high time we got back on course toward what is right and righteous for all. If we suddenly recognize that essential workers are the people stocking our shelves, delivering our packages, picking up our trash, mopping our hospital floors and checking on medications for homebound patients, then maybe it's time we ensured they received a living wage for their work and affordable health care for their life. Maybe taxes shouldn't be linked to payrolls but tied to wealth management transactions that profit by playing the market, or tied to carbon pollution still being pumped into the atmosphere by fossil fuel industries. As ethicist Michael Sandel recently suggested, we need to honestly ask ourselves whether opening the economy means going back to a system that has pulled us apart, or whether we can step forward by faith knowing that we are all in this together.²

So how do we do that? How do we step forward by faith? Well, part of the answer comes from the second time the disciples stopped on the road to Emmaus. It's from the end of the story, as night was falling and the talking trio finally approached their destination. Jesus gave every indication he was walking further when the two disciples

stopped and insisted he stay with them. (Remember as of this point the two disciples had no idea their traveling companion was the risen Christ.) Theirs was a simple act of kindness and connection. Theirs was an act of, what I would call “stepping through a doorway of grace.” They paused on the road, offered an invitation, and then stepped forward into a place of grace and living faith.

People constantly ask me what faith is and whether they have enough of it. Look, faith isn't a thing you possess like a book or a fancy watch. Faith isn't a garment you put on when you need it, like a jacket or sweater. Faith isn't a thing so much as it's a place you step into when you act compassionately. It's a threshold you cross—a doorway you pass through—a choice you make that leads to life, hope, and loving one another as Christ first loved us.

After stopping that second time on the road to Emmaus, the disciples invited a stranger to join them for a meal. They made a choice of hospitality and once they started moving again, they now were walking in the direction of faith. They had drawn on their own Jewish tradition and knew it was right to help this man out. They had taken a breather from their own sad self-focus and were able to focus on the need of another. They made a conscious decision to step forward into community, not walk away from someone in need and close the door behind them. And as they did all that, Easter burst forth around them. The meal they shared became a sacrament—a literal communion with the Lord of life. The stranger they barely knew became the One whom they longed to see more than anyone else in the world. The heaviness that had made every step home a burden to bear was now replaced with a joy that made them rush back to tell the others they'd seen the Lord.

For now, we are all stopped. Things are different because of the coronavirus. But we can still take steps forward. Can our homes be temples where God is welcome? Can our meals be sacraments of the bread of life? Can our care for the community truly include the stranger and the workers who have been invisible and under-appreciated for far too long? Step through the doorway of faith. Trust in a grace that was deeply felt on Easter and in Christ Jesus is still offered to each of us this very day.

¹ Annie Grace, [This Naked Mind](http://thisnakedmind.com), thisnakedmind.com

² Michael Sandel, “Are We All in this Together?”, *New York Times*, April 19, 2020, p. SR15