

“The Way of Life”

Luke 24:1-12

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Easter Sunday

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This Lent, we focused on the way of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. His teachings and choices point us to the qualities we see on our signpost in the Chancel: the way of generosity, compassion, resilience and wisdom ... in short, the way of blessedness. As we come toward the close of the Gospel, we continue to ponder Jesus' way - which in the end, leads us to eternal life.

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Every day, we have choices. We have little choices about what to eat, what to wear. We have bigger choices about how to act, what to love. We have choices about what we worry about, and what we laugh over. We have choices about what to trust and what to dismiss. We have choices about the way we live our lives.

Which, if you think about it, makes us not all that different from the very first disciples.

I love the story we just heard, not just because it's the Easter story, but because it exposes the poignant choices of the first believers. For three years Jesus' disciples had staked their *lives* on their choice to follow Jesus. They'd left *everything* for him. They'd let themselves get caught up in Jesus' teachings – all his talk of “love your enemy” and “turn the other cheek” – all the times he touched contagious lepers and ate with cheating tax collectors. They'd gotten on his band-wagon, taken those roads of compassion and generosity. They'd trusted when he said follow him – that he'd lead them to resilience and wisdom. Instead? Instead he led them to failure, humiliation, to his death on the cross.

It was just a week ago, on Palm Sunday, when the road took a sharp turn. Jesus marched into Jerusalem on that donkey, marched right into the hands of his enemies: the priests, who were all for protecting their beautiful worship space, their sacred rites. He marched into the hands of the cynical politicians, who just wanted to keep their power intact. As long as Jesus had kept to the margins, he didn't matter to them. But when he started drawing crowds – well, they decided, something had to be done. By Friday, they had killed him. It wasn't the terrorists who crucified Jesus. It was the authorities – the religious and political authorities. They wanted to make a point, to dissuade other starry-eyed do-gooders. They would make sure no one missed their message.

Now, three days later, it's over. A dead-end. All that is left is to anoint the body – which the women proceed to do - Mary Magdalene and Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and all the others who want to do the right thing – to honor the dead - and then get on with their lives.

But then ... that's when things start to get terribly strange. The women who go to the tomb come running back with this laughable story. They say that the stone is rolled away. They say that Jesus' body isn't there. They say that two men in white clothes tell them not to look for the living among the dead.

So what do the disciples make of this? Of course they think it's an idle tale. They think the women have gone completely mad. Because, Jesus' followers – they'd been duped once already. They won't be fooled again. So they make the logical choice, the sensible choice. They choose not to believe the women. They choose the way of self-protection, of logic, of safety. They're back 100% to choosing the ways of the world.

Except ... except for one person: Simon Peter. He chooses instead to retrace the women's steps. He chooses instead to go back and see for himself. He chooses instead to wonder: could it possibly be the case that the way of Jesus doesn't end with death? Could it possibly be true that Jesus leads to the way of life? Could it possibly be that Jesus is still living, still leading us, still drawing us toward God, who loves us to our core?

Which leads right back to *us* ... and the choices that we face today, right here, right now, on Easter. We're faced with exactly the same choices that the first disciples faced: we have to choose. Is the way of Jesus naïve and ridiculous? Or is it the way that leads to real glory ... the way that leads to abundant life?

This Lent, we have been walking with Jesus, watching him as he embodied and encouraged the qualities of life we see on our signpost: the way of blessedness, resilience, compassion; the way of generosity and wisdom. We discovered deep peace as he led us in the way of resilience, inviting us to pray boldly and not lose heart. We discovered joy as he led us in the way of compassion, showing us that we *can* make peace with our prodigal brothers and sisters. We discovered amazing freedom along the way of generosity, loosening our grasp on our possessions, transforming what we offer God and multiplying it beyond measure. We discovered true identity and meaning on the way to wisdom, inviting us to set down our worries about what we eat and what we wear and what we accumulate in our treasure. We thought this was

the way. We willingly followed him. And then ... and then the terrorist attack in Belgium happened, right in the middle of Holy Week. And the attacks in Turkey, and the attacks in Iraq, and the attacks in Nigeria. And like the first disciples, we wondered ... we wondered whether we were just naïve. Naïve to believe that compassion matters, naïve to think that generosity makes any difference, naïve to imagine that resilience can stem hatred, naïve to wish that wisdom might trump weapons.

But today: today we're invited to remember – to remember that we *do* have a choice to make, and it's not just theoretical. It isn't easy, but it's real. And I'll share with you the story of one man who made the choice to follow Jesus on his way ... to trust that Jesus' pathway leads to life ... to trust that he still walks with us, is here with us, even now.

My friend Jon Walton started his pastorate at First Presbyterian Church in Manhattan a month before September 11. His church is just a few blocks from the World Trade Center. To say that his church's world was shattered that day is a vast understatement.

A year later, Jon says,

“On the first anniversary following 9/11 ... we held a service of remembrance and prayers for peace at First Church. While the service was well attended, I could not help but notice a man in the front row with a t-shirt, bearing the names of firefighters from a particular firehouse in the neighborhood.

“As the service progressed, the man in the t-shirt seemed to become more and more agitated and restless, until in the middle of the prayers for peace, he opened the door to his pew, stepped into the aisle, slammed the door shut, and tromped down the center aisle all the way back to the Fifth Avenue entrance. After the service I could not find him.

“Fast forward one year. On the second anniversary of 9/11 we held another service of remembrance and prayers for peace, as we have every year since the days of 9/11. After the service was over, a man came up to me and asked if he could speak to me. He told me his name and said that a year earlier he had been in the congregation on the front row wearing a t-shirt with the names of fellow firefighters from his firehouse who had died on the day of the attack. He said the service had been tough for him to sit through, that in fact he finally had to leave because he was so angry and eaten up with frustration he couldn’t sit in the service any longer. He said he started walking up Fifth Avenue, across 14th Street, up Sixth Avenue, pounding his fist in his hand, angry, crying, furious at me for praying to a God that he was certain had gone deaf.

“He finally made his way to 17th Street, blinded by fury, standing in front of a Barnes & Noble, he started beating on the glass of the storefront, crying in anger, and finally collapsing exhausted on bended knee saying, ‘Okay God, I give up. What is it that you want me to do?’ He looked in the window and saw a book with a title, something like ‘Hate is Not the Answer.’ Hate is not the answer. And he said he then knew what he had to do. He organized a group of six fellow firefighters and spent the better part of six months sponsored by the Fire Department of New York traveling in the Middle East speaking to schoolchildren and in mosques and to wherever people would listen, about what happened on 9/11 and how hate is not the answer.

“‘I didn’t like what you had to say,’ he confessed, ‘but I believe that the only way we can ever have peace is if we stop hating each other and start loving each other, the way Jesus said.’”ⁱ

Easter confronts us with a choice to make. Not just a theoretical choice, but a concrete choice. Not just a one-time choice, but a step-by-step choice.

But If all that's there is cynicism ... if all that's left is fear ... if all that's in our hearts is self-protection or anger or pride or defensiveness ... what kind of life are we living?

Fifteen years after the attacks on 9/11, our church is choosing the path that Jesus laid before us. We've helped start two schools in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon – schools run by local Protestants and American mission workers – schools for displaced Syrian refugees. One hundred children aged 6-11 are in school, some of them for first time. Christians and Muslims study together. Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims study together. One of their teachers – Tammy Ibrahim, the wife of a pastor from Aleppo – mostly teaches Muslim students. And with a twinkle in her eye she says, “An opportunity, yes?” And another woman adds, “We fight radical extremism, armed with Education and Love.” And still another woman adds, “We realize that prejudice and fear challenge us in our many walks of life, but also that God walks with us.” I agree. Jesus walks ahead of us – alongside us - showing us the way.

I don't know what battles you're fighting these days ... what terror scares you, what insecurity taunts you ... I don't know what regrets haunt you or what relationships have left you angry or broken-hearted. I don't know what deep hopes you harbor, or what you aspire to do with your one wild and precious life. But this I do know: our choices matter. We can choose to scream at your enemies, or we can choose to love them with compassion. We can choose to hoard our investments, or we can choose to be generous, to share what we have with a neighbor who lost their job, or give to the poor who are the most crushed by the state budget crisis, and by doing so, store up our treasures in heaven. We can choose to throw our hands up in the air and give up hoping for a better world, for a better life for our kids, for a better nation, or we can choose to get involved, to make a difference, to rise with resilience and wisdom. I've been close to people's lives in their hardest hours to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is true: the little things, they add up. The

choices we make, they matter. We *can* choose to love ... because God first loved us.

Oh, one other thing I know: the saying is true, that if you want to go fast, go alone – but if you want to go far, walk together. Jesus offers us the choice to walk with one another in this way of life. Jesus invites us to follow him together along this journey that we share. Jesus welcomes us to become a family of faith, to share our joys and sorrows with one another so that we do not walk alone. Honestly, I don't know how people do it without their family of faith. I invite you to join us on this journey for our hearts are stronger when we walk together and our lives are sturdier when we lean on each other and our voices are more sure when we proclaim together:

Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!**

Amen.

ⁱ Shared by Rev. Jon Walton in an unpublished paper for the Moveable Feast preaching colloquium, 2016.