“On the Road Again”

I don’t know about y’all, but I’ve been doing a lot of walking lately. The first walk of the day begins around 11am and goes for about 2 miles. The second walk of the day begins around 3pm and goes for another 2 miles. I’m just walking to walk. I have no destination on my walks. No matter if I go on a shorter walk or a longer walk, if I change up my route, if I intentionally go down roads where I don’t know where they will lead, I always end up right back at home because I have nowhere to go. And it’s not just that I have nowhere to go, it’s that I can’t go anywhere. The only places I can go are my front yard, my back yard, my couch, and the store every two weeks.

My walks have become a form of waiting. I’m walking and I’m waiting, walking and waiting, day in and day out. I’m waiting to have a destination again, to see friends, to go eat at a restaurant, to hug people (and if you know me well, you know hugs aren’t my favorite thing, so that’s a big deal). I’m waiting to gather with all of you here in the Sanctuary again. I’m just waiting, and I imagine that all of you are too.

It feels like we’re stuck in what Dr. Seuss calls “The Waiting Place” in the book *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* “The Waiting Place... for people just waiting. Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or a plane to go, or the mail to come, or the rain to go, or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow, or waiting around for a Yes or No, or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting.”

We’re all just waiting.

The two men on the road to Emmaus were also just waiting. Walking and waiting. It was Easter evening, and they had heard the good news from the women who had seen the empty tomb, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” Peter had run to the tomb and confirmed that it was indeed empty. So where was Jesus?

The men were walking with a destination, Emmaus, but it seems like a pretty hopeless
walk. Why is Emmaus significant? Other than being seven miles from Jerusalem, we don’t know much about it. So it seems to me that this is nothing more than a waiting walk; yes, there is a destination, but this is a walk for waiting. Waiting to find out where exactly Jesus is. Waiting to see Jesus so they could know if it was really true, if he really had risen from the dead. Waiting.

As they are walking, talking and waiting, Jesus himself walks up. The text tells us that their eyes were kept from recognizing him. We don’t know if their eyes were kept from recognizing Jesus by some divine power or if they were just too overwhelmed and preoccupied from the events of the last few days. For whatever reason though, they couldn’t tell that it was Jesus.

But it’s not just that they couldn’t tell that the man walking with them on the road was their friend Jesus, it also seems that they couldn’t tell who Jesus actually was. When Jesus asks them what they are discussing, they begin to tell him about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet. A prophet? Were they not paying attention?

While the two men on the road are not thought to be members of the twelve disciples, they were likely part of Jesus’ extended group of followers. They had seen the miracles he had performed and they had heard him foretell his death and resurrection no less than three times. How could they believe Jesus was just a prophet and not the Son of God?

The men allude to knowing that Jesus had said he would be raised on the third day. However, even though they had heard the witness of the women and Peter, they still don’t seem to believe.

So Jesus, ever the teacher, begins to explain to them everything that was said about him in the scriptures. He opens the scriptures to them causing their hearts to burn within them as they later say. So why couldn’t they see him? Were they just not paying attention?

Paying attention can be tricky. Especially today. We never really have to pay attention or see anything around us because it’s become pretty normal to stay glued to the smart phone in our pocket. Or right now, it’s really easy to only pay attention to
COVID-19 news coverage and forget that there are other things that deserve our attention.

The past five Wednesdays, myself and other Wilshire folks have gotten together over a Zoom call to discuss Barbara Brown Taylor’s *An Altar in the World*. The book is all about being open to and discovering the Divine presence all around us through spiritual practices that may at first seem a bit mundane. One of the spiritual practices Taylor writes about is paying attention—she spends a whole chapter and then some talking about this spiritual practice.

At the heart of the spiritual practice of paying attention is reverence. Reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self—something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding. What most often hinders reverence or paying attention is the self. We get in our own way and forget to look upon each other and the world around us with reverence and we miss things.

Taylor writes that when you pay attention to the world around you, even the smallest of things, things so small as a single peppercorn, you learn to see God. You learn how God pays attention to the smallest of things and to you. You just have to make sure you don’t get in your own way, so you don’t miss it.

I wonder if part of the reason the men on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognize their friend Jesus and they didn’t recognize Jesus as the Son of God was because they had gotten in their own way. Their hearts were burning within them and they didn’t even notice. Their bodies were trying to tell them the Son of God was walking with them and they ignored it.

We would do well to listen to our bodies and the things they try and tell us. Thankfully, as their walk was coming to an end, their bodies told them they were tired and hungry and the men listened. They reached Emmaus and invited the stranger on the road with them to sit, rest and eat with them.

Since the men can’t grasp who Jesus is, he decides to make it blatantly obvious. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, just as he had a few nights before. It wasn’t until
Jesus gives each of them the bread that their eyes were opened and they realized who was sitting with them. I wonder if when Jesus gave them the bread, he called them by name. I wonder if this is what opened their eyes. I wonder if Jesus said “Here, Cleopas, take this bread” and the moment his name was said, Cleopas knew it was Jesus just as Mary Magdalene knew it was Jesus the moment he said her name in the garden by the tomb in John’s Gospel. There is power in calling someone by name. There is power in being called by name and known.

It’s the human condition to miss things, to not pay attention. Thankfully, when we do miss it, we have a Savior who knows us, who sits down with us to bluntly reveal himself and call our attention by name.

After Jesus reveals himself, he immediately disappears. The men realize how they hadn’t paid attention. They realize he had given them signs as to who he was and they just couldn’t see it. But now they have seen it. They have seen the risen Lord, and they have to share this good news. They have to get back on the road again. They have to get back on the road to get to Jerusalem to go see their friends there and tell them that Jesus is risen, he is risen indeed!

Friends, right now it seems we are just waiting. We are walking on the road to Emmaus and waiting for Jesus to come and meet us. We are waiting to be reunited, to worship together in person, to hug, and to dine at Christ’s table together again. We are walking and waiting, waiting and walking.

The good news is that on our own road to Emmaus, to a destination that isn’t really a destination, in our waiting and walking, the risen Lord meets us there.

Even if we aren’t paying attention, Jesus still meets us there. It may not be how we expect him to meet us. It may take us a while to open our eyes and pay attention. But Jesus is always there, walking, waiting and journeying with us until we can break bread together and get back on the road again to go and see our friends to tell each other that Jesus is risen, he is risen indeed!