Easter Sunday, March 30, 1986
EASTER JOURNEYS
Luke 24:1-12

One of the most significant points about the resurrection stories as recorded in the Gospels is that no one, not even Jesus' closest disciples, expected it to happen.

The women had gone to the tomb on early Sunday morning to take better care of the body. Since Jesus had been crucified on a Friday afternoon and was buried later that day, and since the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown on that same day, in all the hurry, the close friends of Jesus had not had time to properly prepare the body for burial. So, on early Sunday morning, the first day of the week, they returned to the tomb to take care of the body. They arrived at the tomb expecting death but found instead, life!

Each account in the New Testament tells a similar story. Faithful people expecting to find death on that morning were surprised by life. The Gospel according to John tells how Mary Magdalene wept at the doorway of the empty tomb when she discovered it was empty. She cried because she assumed that someone had hidden or stolen the body somewhere else. She didn't expect to experience the risen Christ. Thus, when Jesus himself talked to her near the tomb, she at first did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener.

So unexpected was Easter that a little later when some of the disciples were told by some of the women that Jesus had risen, they didn't believe it. They didn't expect it!

That's the nature of an Easter journey. We are on our way expecting to find one thing, but find something quite different. Easter journeys can be a part of your life's journeys and mine.

The Gospel of Luke tells about another Easter journey. Two followers of Jesus were walking along the road to the village of Emmaus late Easter Sunday afternoon. They were trying to get away from Jerusalem, where the crucifixion had taken place and their hopes dashed. More than anything else, they were sad.

In a 1960's novel entitled Couples, John Updike writes of the "chronic sadness of late Sunday afternoon, when the couples had exhausted their game — basketball or beachgoing or tennis or touch football — and saw an evening weighing in upon them, an evening without a game, an evening spent among flickering lamps and cranky children and leftover food and the nagging half-read newspaper with its weary portents and atrocities, an evening when marriages closed in upon themselves like flowers from which the sun is withdrawn."

We know about the sadness of late Sunday afternoons. We know about sadness on our life's journey.

As these two disciples continued on their sad journey to Emmaus, a stranger joined them. They didn't recognize him. He asked them what they were talking about and they stood still, looking sad.

After chiding the stranger for not knowing what all had happened, one of them, with a great rush and pell-mell of testimony, told of the arrest, trial, the death, and the amazing story of some of the women earlier that day. "We had hoped," he said, "we had hoped."

The stranger grew impatient with them, called them foolish and slow to believe, and proceeded to tell them of God's working through Jesus.

At last, they arrived in Emmaus. The two offered the stranger hospitality, and while they were at the table, the stranger took up bread and broke it, and suddenly they saw — their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, and then he vanished from their sight.

What about our journeys? Where does Easter occur?

First of all, the Easter story tells us that the Christ of God is walking with us on our journeys through life. He is part of the conversation as we ponder life's deepest questions and mysteries.
Christ is risen means the absolutely undefeatable presence of God in the here and now of our journeys here on earth. Christ is risen means that life is shot through and through with a strange and wonderful victory — that God is not defeated by our defeats, nor by God's grace are we. Christ is risen means that the power and love of God cannot be buried or locked up in any tomb.

You can meet this power and love of God on your life's journey, in spite of any sadness.

Perhaps you had hoped for strong and vibrant health to a ripe age, but you found yourself troubled and frightened by illness in the younger and middle years. Perhaps you had hoped for the companionship of a loved one until the golden years, but you have been left alone. Perhaps you had hoped that your life could be spent in the development of a first love and interest, but the years have gone by and your commitment put you in bonds. Perhaps you had hoped for children and they did not come. Perhaps you had hoped for a quality in your life that would win the respect of others and satisfy your own self-respect, but the buffetings and the pressures and the hard days have made you something shoddy — if not always in the eyes of others, at least in your own. Perhaps you had hoped that your marriage would last until your life's journey's end, but now you are sad because of its failure. Perhaps life finds you, like those two on the journey to Emmaus, standing still, looking sad.

I declare to you today in the joy of faith, hope for your life's journey. It can turn into an Easter journey if you let it. The Easter story means that you can trust that there is a stranger on the road with you every minute and that stranger is God. You can trust the peace that came over you one day when you felt that the death of a beloved person was held in ultimate hands.

Secondly, we experience the power of the risen Christ through other people we meet in our life's journey.
A young man was returned from the war without his legs. When the healing of the body had completed itself, he was still far from returning to civilian life. Something had died in him when he found he would never walk again. He lay in his hospital bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. He refused to talk to anyone who tried to help him. He refused to cooperate with doctors or nurses who wanted to help him to make the big adjustment.

One day, another inmate of the hospital strolled in and sat down on a chair near the bed. He drew a harmonica from his pocket and began to play softly. The patient looked at him for a second, then back to the ceiling. That was all for that day. The next day, the player came again. For several days, he continued to come and play quietly. One day he said, "Does my playing annoy you?" The patient said, "No, I guess I like it." He talked a little more each day.

One day, the harmonica player was in a jovial mood. He played a sprightly tune and began to do a tap dance for his friend. The other looked on, but was apparently unimpressed by the exhibition. “Hey, why don’t you smile once and let a guy know you’re alive!” The dancer was smiling as he gave the gentle rebuke. But the amputee said, “I might as well be dead as in the fix I’m in.” “Okay,” answered the happy one, “so you’re dead. But you’re not as dead as the fellow who was crucified 2000 years ago, and he came out of it all right.” “Oh, it’s easy for you to preach,” replied the patient, “but if you were in my fix, you’d sing a different tune.”

With this, the dancer stood up, saying, “I know a two-thousand-year-old resurrection is pretty far in the dim past. So maybe an up-to-date example will help you to believe it can be done.” With that, he pulled up his trouser legs and the young man in the bed saw two artificial limbs. Needless to say, his own resurrection began that moment. Today, he is living a normal life and helping other people to look up, to find their own Easter journey.

Thirdly, sometimes too, there are those among us who experience the power of the risen Christ in an unforgettable, shattering moment, like those women who went to the tomb on that first Easter journey, and it can turn one’s life around.
Bill W., one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, had such an experience. After years of drinking so that he began to fear for his sanity, so much so that once in a drunken fit, he said, “I threw a sewing machine at Lois, my dear Lois. Another time I got mad at her and stormed through the house kicking out door panels, smashing walls with my fists. I remember a night when I was in such a hell that I was afraid the demons inside me would propel me through the window.”

In midsummer 1934, Bill entered New York City’s Charles B. Towns Hospital, which specialized in the treatment of alcoholism. The doctor told Bill’s wife, Lois, that not many alcoholics as far down the slope as Bill had ever recovered. He was already showing signs of brain damage.

However, after treatment, he went home and stayed sober for several months. But then the morning following Armistice Day, he was in a drunken stupor again. Not long afterward, Bill’s old friend and fellow drinker, Ebby Thatcher, phoned. Bill invited him over. How good it would be to have a drink with his former drinking buddy. Soon the doorbell rang. There stood Ebby — clear of eye and clean of breath. “What’s got into you, Ebby?” Bill asked. Ebby grinned and replied, “I’ve got religion.”

Ebby had met another man named Rowland Hazard. Rowland had experienced a profound change in his life through a religious experience with an organization known as the Oxford Group. He told Ebby about it and now Ebby was telling Bill.

A couple of weeks later, after another drinking binge, Bill was back in the hospital. Ebby came to see him and said, “Pray to whatever God you think is out there.” During one more sleepless night, Bill fell to the very bottom and in desperation he called out, “If there is a God, let God show himself. I am ready to do anything.” Suddenly, the hospital room “lit up with a great white light.” A strange ecstasy flooded through Bill. “A wind, not of air but of spirit, was blowing,” is how he described it. He said, “I felt at peace and I thought, ‘No matter how wrong things seem to be, things are all right with God and God’s world.'”

Bill W. never took another drink after that, but he always assured others that they need not have the same kind of sudden blinding experience. Most of us meet the power of the risen Christ in more gradual ways — but meet him we do.

I tell you these true stories this morning because Easter is no abstruse doctrine to struggle with intellectually. Easter is rather a message — that this earth is occupied territory — that the self-giving, sacrificial love present in Jesus Christ overcomes even death, and this sacrificial self-giving love is present for all of us. Your life's journey and mine can be an Easter journey. Amen.