Sunday, April 21, 1996
WALKING WITH GOD
Luke 24:13-18,28-35

God joins us and walks with us on our journey through life, but we don't always recognize that it's God until later when we can look back. Soren Kierkegaard remarked, "We live life forward by understanding it backward."

There's a story in the Gospel of Luke about two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday afternoon. Their journey was filled with sadness. They had little hope. As they walked, their conversation centered around the events of the past few days — the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. While they were walking and discussing these things, Jesus joined them, but they didn't recognize him. Why? Because they were too preoccupied with their sadness and weren't expecting him.

Jesus asked them why they were so sad, and one of them, surprised, said, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have taken place in these days?" They explained what had happened to Jesus and concluded by saying, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped.

Then the stranger began interpreting the scriptures, giving them a new understanding. Their idea of redemption had been more political than spiritual, but this stranger's interpretation of the scriptures included a Messiah who would have to suffer and die.

When they arrived in Emmaus, the stranger acted as if he were going further, but they insisted that he stay with them and have supper. While they were at the table, the stranger took bread, broke it, and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him — but just as suddenly, he vanished from their sight.

A flood of memories came to them. They remembered the nature of Jesus' words along the road. His testimony about suffering and glory began to make sense. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That burning sensation was a kind of spiritual "heartburn." Their intuition had been telling them that this stranger was more than he appeared, and they should have paid closer attention to his words, even though his interpretation of the suffering and death of the Messiah was new to them and difficult to accept.

They had been hoping for something different, but now they had a new kind of hope and a new understanding of God and God's grace.

But what does this story say to us today? The road to Emmaus is familiar to all of us. It's the common road walked by those who are disappointed — the highway of the sad, the path of those who had hoped but now feel their hopes were in vain.

The two men were walking to Emmaus to get away from Jerusalem. They were trying to escape their disappointment, but their minds remained fixed on it. The loss of hope is difficult to bear.

This story gives us a new understanding of where the risen Christ is. It tells us that God walks with us on our journey through life, especially when we are sad and without hope, even if we don't always recognize God's presence until later. That's certainly been true in my life. It's often only in hindsight that I realize God had been walking with me all along, though at the time, I thought it was just a stranger.

The story is so simple yet so profound that it's easy to miss its message. The Christ of God is walking through life with you and me. He is part of our conversation when we ponder life's deepest questions and mysteries. He is taking supper with us at the end of the day.

This story confirms and strengthens the amazing clue to God's presence in our lives, a presence we don't always recognize at first. It happens all the time. When Mary first met the risen Christ, she thought he was the gardener. Later, when Peter and the disciples saw him on the beach in Galilee, they thought he was just a friendly fisherman.

This story has a message for those of you who are sad today. But is there anyone to whom it does not speak? We've all been on the highway of sadness. Time and time again, we have felt and said, We had hoped… we had hoped.

Perhaps you had hoped for strong and vibrant health into old age, but now find yourself troubled and frightened by illness. Perhaps you had hoped for the companionship of a loved one through the years, but find yourself alone. Perhaps you had hoped to spend your life developing a particular vocation, but the years have passed, and your dreams remain unfulfilled due to other commitments. Perhaps you had hoped for children, but they didn't come. Or maybe you had hoped for a quality in your life that would win the respect of others and satisfy your own self-respect, but life's pressures and hard days have made you feel something less than what you had hoped.

This story speaks to all of us. It says that there is a stranger walking beside you on your road — someone who seems like a stranger but is, in fact, God. You may not always recognize God's presence because you're preoccupied with your sadness or problems, or perhaps you've forgotten how to recognize God. Notice that when the two men in the story invited the stranger to stay for supper — when they practiced hospitality — they became aware that God had been walking with them all along.

Here's something more to consider: perhaps you don't recognize God walking with you because you never take the time to walk, talk, or listen — especially to a stranger who might be God.

For some, life feels more like a downward slide than a walk. Perhaps you allow anything and everything to pull you down. Maybe you're always complaining, always feeling cheated, always seeing the worst in things.

Or perhaps your life feels like a never-ending treadmill rather than a walk to Emmaus. You're constantly on the move, never slowing down. There's no time to talk with a stranger, or anyone else for that matter. You're always exhausted but afraid to slow down for fear of losing ground. It's difficult for a stranger — or even a friend — to walk beside you on a treadmill. You don't see many treadmills made for two.

For others, life is like a roller coaster — one minute you're high with life, with work, with God, and the next minute you're down. One day you're on top of the world, the next day you're at the bottom. It's hard to recognize God's presence when you're constantly going up and down.

And then there are those whose lives feel like an uncontrollable escalator. You can't stop. You keep upping the ante, never feeling secure, always needing more. You have little life outside of work, and it's hard to recognize God next to you on the escalator because, like the treadmill, there's little room for God to stand beside you. God may be ahead of you or behind you, but you don't always notice.

I don't know which metaphor best fits your life — a walk to Emmaus, a downward slide, a treadmill, a roller coaster, or an escalator. Maybe none, or maybe a combination of them. I only ask you to consider them and see if one fits.

Above all, remember this: God is walking with you on your journey through life, and often it's in the guise of a stranger you don't recognize. Listen to that stranger, and when evening comes, invite the stranger to dinner. As you eat together, you'll discover that it's God who has been with you all along.

"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."

Isn't that what often happens? In a fleeting moment, you recognize God, and then God vanishes from your sight. Why? Because God is not only walking with you but also going ahead of you, leading you, and inviting you to follow.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Amen.