Book 32

Sunday April 21, 1996

WALKING WITH GOD Luke 24:13-18, 28-35

God joins us and walks with us in our journey through life, but we do not always recognize that it is God until later when we are able to look back. Soren Kierkegaard remarked that "we live life forward by understanding it backward."

There's that story in the Bible in the Gospel of Luke about two men who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, on that first Easter Sunday afternoon. Their journey was filled with sadness. They had little hope. As they walked, their conversation was about the things that had happened in the last few days, the arrest of Jesus, his trial and crucifixion. And while they were walking and discussing, Jesus joined them but

they did not recognize him. Why? Because they were too preoccupied with their sadness and were not expecting him.

He asked them why they were so sad and in surprise one of them said to him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not 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 and gave them a new insight which they at first did not understand. Their idea of redemption was more politically than spiritually oriented, 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 walked on ahead as if he were going further but they insisted that he stay with them and have supper. And while they were at the table, the stranger took bread and broke it and gave it to them and suddenly they saw, their eyes were opened, and almost as suddenly they saw no more. As soon as they recognized him, Jesus disappeared from their sight.

A flood of memories ensued. They began to remember 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?"

"Heartburn." "Pyrosis" is the technical medical term. "Acid reflux" is another name. They were only using it as a figure of speech to indicate that while they were walking and talking with the stranger, their intuition was telling them he was more than a stranger and they should pay attention to what he was saying, 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 have to say to us today?

The road to Emmaus is a familiar one. It is the common road walked by all of us in life who are disappointed--the highway of the sad, the road of those who have hoped but have felt their hopes were in vain.

The two were going to Emmaus to get away from Jerusalem. They were trying to get away from their disappointment, but they talked of little else. Loss of hope is difficult.

This story gives us a new understanding of where the Risen Christ is. It tells us that God is walking with us in our journey through life, especially when we are sad and without hope and that we do not always recognize that God has been walking with us until later. That's certainly been true in my life. It is when I have looked back and

remembered that I then knew that God had been walking with me although when it was happening I thought it was a stranger.

This story is so artful and profound in its simplicity that it's possible to miss its point completely. The Christ of God is walking through life with you and me. He is part of the 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 the presence of God that we find in many places in our lives but do not always at first recognize. 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 a friendly fisherman.

Today I want you to know that this story has a message especially for those of you who are sad. 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 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 latter years of your life, but you have been left alone. Perhaps you had hoped that your life would be spent in the development of a particular vocation, but the years have gone by and your dreams have not been realized because of other commit-

ments. Perhaps you had hoped for children but 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 life often finds you, like those two, walking in sadness toward Emmaus.

This story says to you that there is a stranger walking on the road with you every minute and that stranger is really not a stranger at all, it is God. You do not always at first recognize this stranger because you are so preoccupied with your sadness or your own problems or maybe you have forgotten how to recognize God.

Note especially in this story that when the two men invited the stranger to stay for supper, when they practiced hospitality and when they were eating together, it was then that they became aware that it was God who had been walking with them all along.

Here's something more to consider. There may be some among you who do not recognize God walking with you in your life because you never walk, or talk, or listen, especially to a stranger who might be God.

That's because some people's lives are more like a downward slide than a walk. Maybe you allow anything and everything to pull you down. Maybe you are always complaining. You always feel cheated. You see no reason to invest yourself in

anyone or anything.

Or perhaps your life is like a never ending tread-mill rather than a walk to Emmaus. There's no time for you to talk with a stranger or anyone else. You are always exhausted, but fear slowing down for fear for losing ground. On a treadmill you never truly get anywhere--you use up all your energy so you can safely stay in one place. It's difficult for a stranger or even a friend to walk with you on a treadmill. Are you aware of any treadmills made for two or more so you can walk side by side?

There are others whose life rather than being like a walk to Emmaus is more like a ride on a roller coaster. One minute you're high with life, with work, with God. The next minute you're plunged

down low. One minute or one day or week, you're on top of the world and then the next week you're at the bottom. One day you're friendly with everyone you meet, then the next day you snap at people for no apparent reason. It's difficult to recognize God when you are on a roller coaster, when you're always going up or down.

Here's one more metaphor. For some people, their journey through life is one of being on an uncontrollable escalator. Despite what happens, you can't stop. You keep on upping the ante in your life. You never feel financially comfortable--no matter how much you have and you would rather die than give any money away. You have little life outside your work. It's hard to recognize God standing next to you on the escalator be-

cause like the treadmill there's little room for God to stand beside you. Most of the time God is either ahead of you or behind you and therefore you are not aware of God at all.

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 of them or perhaps a combination. I only ask you to consider each one and see if one fits.

Above all, remember this. God is walking with you on your journey through life and many times it can be in the guise of a stranger you don't recognize. Listen to that stranger, and when evening comes, invite the stranger to dinner, and as you eat together you'll discover God in your midst.

"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 the 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 on ahead of you, leading you and God invites you to follow and walk along. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." Amen.