Sunday, April 30, 2000
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES
John 20:19-31

What happened after Easter? That same Sunday evening, the followers of Jesus gathered in a room and locked the doors. They were still afraid. They didn't know what to believe. They had questions about the future. According to the story in John's gospel, while they were there, they experienced the powerful presence of Jesus among them. Even though they had thought it had all come to an end, and even with the presence of Jesus among them, there were still many doubts, but now they knew their journey was not over. It was continuing. When they had first accepted the invitation to become followers of the way, they had no idea where it might lead. Now they still weren't sure, yet the faith and energy of Easter gave them hope in the midst of their fear.

Life is like that for people who have faith that the world can be better tomorrow than it is today, that creation is not static, that progress is possible. Life is like that for people who believe "there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word," for those who believe they can continue to grow and learn until the day they die. We have our doubts and fears, yet we continue the journey. That's why we Christians continue to describe life as a journey and not as a circle.

This kind of faith begins with people like Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, who followed the call of God to journey to a new place. Their only guarantee was that God would be with them. Throughout the pilgrimage of the Hebrews, it is their desire that the everlasting hills save them from their everlastingness, that something new happen, that the everlasting cycle of human cruelty and our inhumanity to each other be brought to an end. That desire came from the Spirit of God working in them.

That kind of desire, that kind of faith, is resident in each one of us from the moment of our birth because we are created in God's image and God's Spirit dwells in us. Or as Dr. Herbert Benson puts it in his book, Timeless Healing, each one of us is "wired for God." In some people, that wiring seems to have lost its conductivity, or that faith is dormant and needs to be awakened, but it's always there.

It was the experience of the early followers of Jesus, and it has been my experience and the experience of countless others, that the continuing journey of spiritual growth can be one of the most exciting and energizing dynamic processes of our lives. Like all journeys, it has its starts and stops, its detours. Sometimes we get lost and need to ask for directions, and sometimes we are in holding patterns.

For many people, the faith they grew up with loses its meaning during adolescence or in college. Others, who never had much spiritual nurture in childhood, begin exploring their spiritual nature for the first time in adolescence or young adulthood. Still others have an early faith, and it goes dormant for a time, but if they get married and have children, they begin the journey again. There are also those who, because of some tragedy or crisis in their lives, begin once again to re-examine their relationship to God, and even though the faith they grew up with has lost its meaning, they know the journey can continue.

In the same way as we grow emotionally and intellectually over the years, we can also grow spiritually if we allow ourselves.

This weekend, 46 young people in our congregation are continuing their journey of faith and spiritual growth through the rite of confirmation, so this sermon is directed especially to them. But it is for all of us, because we all need to continue the spiritual journey. They are discovering, as we need to continually discover, that our spiritual growth goes through many stages. As one spiritual guide put it, “There is a spiritual mountain that all of us (or at least a lot of us) are trying to climb. There are many paths up that mountain... those paths may be rough or smooth, steep or easy, colorful, tiring, or exhilarating.” Jesus said it another way to his early followers, “I have many sheep who are not of this fold.”

In some ways, these young people who are being confirmed are like those early followers of Jesus right after Easter. They have questions and dreams about their future. They have doubts. They have had different types of spiritual awakenings. They are at different points in their spiritual journey. Today, they are confirming their decision to follow the way of Jesus, even though many of them have little idea where that might lead in the future. I can only say to you: be patient and continue to grow spiritually and intellectually. God is with you on your journey.

For those of us who seek to follow the way of Jesus, our journey begins with our baptism. In that way, we choose a religious path and start walking. If you were baptized or dedicated as an infant, your family helped you to begin in the Christian way, and before you could walk yourself, they carried you.

As with all journeys, you can become fearful along the way as you pass from one stage to another. Sometimes it will seem as if you are losing your faith completely. Some of you will not be prepared for how significantly your spiritual outlook and understanding of God can change.

In my 45 years of ministry, I have met all kinds of individuals who say their education has convinced them of the folly of spirituality and religion. They say to me that it’s all superstitious nonsense — illogical, senseless, and useless. A closer analysis reveals that these individuals’ spiritual understanding hasn’t kept pace with their emotional, intellectual, and moral development. They ask how any mature, educated adult could think there’s an old man with a beard looking down at us from the sky. I’ve discovered that many of these critics still look at God through the lenses of childhood, when they were last involved with religion. The point is that it is possible for you to feel spiritually dry because your spiritual side has been freeze-dried in childhood or early adolescence. The danger is that some people are then drawn to the rigidities of authoritarian religious leaders and even involvement in cults. Others of you may be tempted to reject religion entirely without realizing that a spiritually mature person can combine what he or she knows logically, scientifically, and practically with a rich life of faith.

One new book I’ve been studying recently is called Finding Your Religion, with the subtitle, “When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning.” Earlier this year, I led a three-session seminar based on this book, so some of you have read it or attended one or more of those discussions. The author, the Rev. Scotty McLennan, describes six stages of spiritual development possible from birth to death. There’s nothing magic about these six. Someone else might divide the stages into four or seven or nine. It’s simply one helpful way of trying to understand your spiritual journey, and it’s a very useful book for helping you to look at yourself. The point is, your spiritual life is not supposed to be static and unchanging. Growth is possible and desirable in the same way that it is in all other endeavors.

As you continue your spiritual journey, here are some guidelines that come from the Bible and the experience of the early followers of Jesus.

First, to continue to grow and mature in your faith, it's not enough to only open your mind and think deeply, as important as that is. You need to also open all of your senses and experience God's creation. Your faith grows from the heart as much as from the head, and it needs your five senses and your mind. Responding to God is more than belief or holding certain ideas. It includes beliefs, but it is much more.

Being a follower of the way of Jesus means having a faith that holds your life together and makes sense at a deep level.

Peter grew up in the Soviet Union. All he knew was that "religion is unintelligible." His parents never went to church in Moscow, and they claimed Jesus never existed, much less God. In elementary school, he learned that science gives you all the answers except the moral ones. There, the Communist Party fills in and tells you what to do. His only concept of God was some guy with a beard who will send you to a place called heaven or hell.

When Peter was sixteen, his parents took him for a boat trip along the Volga River. A major incident sticks in his mind from those three days on the water. It happened on the third night, as he was sitting out under the stars on the upper deck. No one was around. Everything was quiet except for the gentle slapping of small waves against the bow. For at least an hour, he sat alone, deeply breathing in the night air and feeling a slight chill that made his spine tingle. The hills along the shore seemed very boring, with nothing growing on them. He kept staring at them, lost in thought. Suddenly, he felt himself losing all personal boundaries and merging into the hills.

He immediately had a clear sense that he and those hills were made of the same stuff. At that moment, he had absolutely no doubt of this truth. "We're both part of each other. There's no essential difference between myself and nature." It was a very powerful event, one he's never forgotten. From that night on, religion was no longer unintelligible. He became a changed man.

Peter then began to appreciate the Christian faith through his ears — through music. He was studying German in Moscow when he first heard a pipe organ playing the St. Matthew and St. John Passion music of Bach. He fell in love with the sound of the organ accompanying the singing, and he began to pick up some of the words of the gospel story in German. To him, it was very moving to hear of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, his betrayal, and his painful execution. Before long, he began reading the Bible in Russian. He saw music as a dialogue between human beings and God. At the age of 17, he joined an organ class in Moscow. He spent years at it. Later, when he came to this country, he began playing for a Protestant church in Boston. There, he found himself drawn into the sermons. The Christian faith is now an important anchor in his life, and he continues to grow and mature spiritually.

A second guideline you need to follow in order to continue your journey is to join with others on the journey. That's what the members of the Confirmation class are doing today in an official capacity. They are committing themselves to become part of a community of faith. God has so made us that we grow spiritually by having traveling companions on the journey. Jesus taught that we most truly experience the presence of God's Spirit among us when two or three or more are gathered together. Notice especially in today's story from the Bible that the followers of Jesus had gathered together on that Easter Sunday evening, and it was when they were

together that they most powerfully experienced his presence. That was also true in all the other post-Easter encounters with the presence of Jesus, and it is still true today.

A third guideline to remember as you continue your journey is that there will be some suffering along the way. Why, when, and how remain a mystery. The fact is that all religious traditions take suffering very seriously. Think of it this way: When you're on a path up a mountain, you can count on some kind of pain along the way. Something will happen. The only question is whether it breaks or strengthens you. Is it a disaster or an opportunity?

My own experience with people who have undergone a lot of suffering is that they often mature faster than their counterparts who haven't. They also demonstrate considerably more empathy with others. It's amazing how many of them later claim to be grateful for their suffering because it deepened them and helped them appreciate life so much more.

A fourth guideline to remember as you continue your journey is that much of spirituality, especially in the Christian faith with its Jewish heritage, is about celebrating and having fun. The root word of the word "holiday" is "holy day." On the 7th day of creation, according to the Bible, God rested, and we are asked to rest every seven days too. Singing, dancing, and feasting all have roots in our faith. To eat, drink, and be merry, says the Bible, is a gift of God. There's a Bible verse that explains that "a merry heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." The Psalmist declared, "This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

There are times, of course, when you will find your spiritual journey boring. That's not unusual. Any trip can become boring some of the time. There's an old Doonesbury cartoon about this. Michael Doonesbury and his wife, J.J., are talking to their daughter about church. Doonesbury says, "Alex, honey, Mom and I have been talking, and we've decided it's time for us to start attending church as a family." The daughter replies, "Church? Church is boring." Doonesbury has an answer: "We thought you might say that. All kids think that." Alex asks, "Didn't you think church was boring when you were a kid?" Doonesbury answers, "Sure, I hated going. But church was good for me, so my parents made me stick it out. You may end up hating church too, but you have to come by that feeling honestly. You have to put in pew time like Mom and I did." "Oh," says Alex, looking thoughtful. Then she wonders aloud, "What if I like it?" Doonesbury looks shocked. "Like it? What do you mean?" Her mother ends the conversation by declaring, "We'll cross that bridge when we get there, honey."

The journey continues. I believe that if you keep at it, it will not only be fun, but it will give you strength in suffering, hope for the future, and your life will make the world better. What could be better than that? Amen.