Sunday, April 14, 2002
HOLY WALK
Luke 24:13-16,28-31

Maybe I say it too frequently, but I am convinced that the best way to understand your life on this earth, and especially your spiritual life, is to picture it as a journey, or as the sermon title indicates — a holy walk. That's because to be on a journey implies movement, purpose, change, road maps, growth, progress, setbacks, getting lost, needing to ask directions, detours, stops, starts, bumps in the road, rough roads, smooth highways, accidents, waiting, surprises, traveling too fast at times, and knowing when to stop and rest. A journey also implies that you can learn new things as you travel.

One way to describe your relationship with God is to think of the Holy One as traveling with you and you traveling with God on your journey through life. In the Bible, since walking was the usual means of travel on a journey, "walking" with God is an ancient and beautiful metaphor. This metaphor is used in one of my favorite Bible verses found in the prophet Micah in the Old Testament: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

There are times when you are aware that God is walking with you and that you are walking humbly with God. And there are other times when you are convinced that you are walking alone or when you prefer to walk alone, and you might even believe you can leave God behind.

Some people expect their life to be a smooth journey at all times with no change in speed, no surprises, no accidents, no detours, no getting lost, and never needing to ask for directions. Or maybe you were raised with the belief that your life's journey would be especially smooth if you attended church once a week and lived a good, clean, decent, moral, and well-behaved life. It was all neatly packaged and gave an image of life more like standing still or going around in a circle rather than being on a journey and moving into uncharted or new territory.

By contrast, the journey of faith, which involves walking with God, as described in the Bible, reveals life to be an adventure — sometimes painful, many times exhilarating, and for the most part uncharted, filled with surprises and not always in our control. On this journey, we frequently discover the "Holy" in ordinary events and the "Sacred" in the midst of our everyday living, even in simple things like walking and eating.

While God walks with us on our journey through life, we do not always recognize it until later when we are able to look back. It's what a friend of mine calls "holy hindsight." Another person said, "We live life forward by understanding it backward."

The Bible has stories of all kinds of journeys. Many of these spiritual journeys have experiences that are similar to the story of the two men walking on the road to Emmaus. It was late afternoon on Easter Sunday. Two followers of Jesus were walking together, and they were sad. Their conversation was about the events of the past several days. They were trying to make sense of what had happened. It's one thing to have an experience, but another thing altogether to understand it or find the meaning. These two friends were talking it over, turning it around in their minds, and trying to come to terms with what had happened.

While they were walking and talking, a stranger joined them — a fellow traveler. It was Jesus, but they didn't recognize him. Why? Maybe because they were too preoccupied with their sadness. Furthermore, they thought he was dead, even though they had heard the reports that he was alive, but they didn't take those reports seriously, so they were not expecting him.

When Jesus asked them what they were discussing, they were a bit annoyed by his question. Hadn't he heard the news? Here they were trying to figure it out, and this stranger knew nothing about what had happened.

How ironic! These men were trying to tell Jesus about himself. Have you ever wanted to be a fly on the wall and hear other people talking about you? Then you might know what they really think. I have to confess that I often wonder what conversations take place in the cars on the way home from church or around the dinner table as people discuss the sermon and dissect it — or maybe some don't talk about it at all.

These two men did their best to tell the stranger the story and concluded by saying, "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped.

Here, too, you can find yourself in the story. You have heard the news of Easter. As you journey through life, you are also trying to understand how it relates to your life. Most, if not all people, carry with them hurts and disappointments. You try to figure out if there is any meaning in them.

Then the stranger began interpreting the scriptures and gave them some new insights. Their idea of redemption, their concept of God's presence in the world, was more politically than spiritually oriented, but this stranger's interpretation of the scriptures included a Messiah who would suffer and die, and his new life would be a whole new story.

It was an alternative way of understanding how God's love works in the world. The end is the beginning. The defeat is a triumph. God's love has not been defeated but is a new and powerful presence now available everywhere and always. Don't you see it?

Something in their intuition told them that this stranger who walked with them was more than just 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. So when they arrived at their destination, they invited this friendly, mysterious stranger to have supper with them.

What happened next was remarkable. Luke writes, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." These are echoes of the words used to describe Jesus' action at the Last Supper. When this happened, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. However, as soon as they recognized him, he vanished. The Spirit of God, as experienced in Jesus, cannot be controlled or contained by a specific creed, ritual, or doctrine. That's the way with God's Spirit at work in the world. No one group, sect, or church has a monopoly on it. No one can control it.

What these "followers of the way" learned in this experience is also what we should never forget: God travels with us. Sometimes we think it is only a stranger, but later we discover it is God. In addition, this Spirit of God is the bread for our journey.

The story of the walk to Emmaus tells us where the Risen Christ is. It tells you that God, as experienced and revealed in Jesus, is walking with you on your life's journey. When you are without hope, when you are sad, you do not always recognize that it is God who has been walking with you until later. That's certainly been true for me. It is when I have looked back and remembered that I knew God had been walking with me all along — when, at the time, I thought it was a stranger and didn't recognize who it was.

Today, I hope you will discover that this story has a message especially for those of you who are short on hope. You've all experienced the journey of saying, "I had hoped … I had hoped."

Maybe you hoped for a strong and vibrant life to a ripe old age, but you found yourself troubled and frightened by an illness in your younger or middle years. Perhaps you had hoped for the companionship of a loved one until the later years of your life, but you have been left alone. Or maybe you had hoped that your life would be fulfilled in the development of a particular vocation, but the years have gone by, and your dreams have not been realized because of other commitments or detours on your journey.

Perhaps you had hoped for children to enrich your life, but they did not come. Maybe you had hoped for a quality in your life that would win the respect of others and satisfy your own self-respect, but the pressures and hard days have made you something less than what you wanted to be — if not always in the eyes of others, at least in your own. Life often finds you, like those two followers in Luke's story, walking in sadness on your life's journey.

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 own burdens.

Note especially in this story that when the two travelers invited the stranger to stay for supper, when they practiced hospitality and invited this person to be their guest and to eat with them, it was then that they became aware that it was Jesus who had been walking with them all along.

Here's something more for you to consider. Maybe you do not imagine your life to be a holy walk, but rather a downward slide. You allow anything and everything to pull you down. Perhaps you are always complaining. You always feel cheated. You see no reason to invest yourself in anyone or to walk to some destination. On a treadmill, you never truly get anywhere. You use up all your energy so you can safely stay in one place. Walking on a treadmill can be lonely, and it doesn't give you much to look forward to. It's also difficult for a stranger, or even a friend, to walk with you on a treadmill.

There are others whose life, rather than being like a holy walk, a downward slide, or a treadmill, 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 minute, day, or week, you're at the bottom. One day you're friendly and upbeat with everyone you meet, then the next day you snap at people for no apparent reason. It's difficult to recognize God being with you on a roller coaster when you're always going up or down.

Here's one more contrasting image. Rather than a holy walk, for some people their journey through life is like being on an uncontrollable escalator with no end in sight. Despite what happens, you can't stop. To make it worse, the escalator gradually increases its speed. You

keep on upping the ante in your life. You are convinced that you have to work harder and harder, and you have little life outside your work.

I don’t know which metaphor best describes your journey — a holy walk, a downward slide, a treadmill, a roller coaster, or an escalator. Maybe none of them, or perhaps a combination.

Above all, remember this: Your life is meant to be a “holy walk.” God is traveling with you on your journey, and many times it can be in the guise of a stranger you don’t recognize until you stop to rest and invite the stranger to break bread with you. Amen.