Sunday, April 10, 2005
WALKING WITH GOD
Micah 6:8; Luke 24:13-18,28-35

It is no accident that many of your favorite hymns and Bible passages have as their theme, "walking with God." In my experience of officiating at funeral services for the past 50 years, a hymn that is requested more than any other is, "In The Garden." Why? Because the words describe walking with Jesus in the garden. To walk with Jesus is to walk with God in human form. Another favorite hymn, which has the same theme and which you love to hear the Plymouth Brass play, is, "Just A Closer Walk With Thee." A third favorite hymn on the same subject, which implies walking with God, is, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

A story I have told many times, but I'm going to tell it again, is about "walking with God." One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him, and he questioned the Lord about it. "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me."

The Lord replied: "My son, my precious child, I love you, and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

There are many Bible verses about walking with God. The 23rd Psalm tells you, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me." The comfort comes from knowing that God is walking with you.

The prophet Micah describes "walking with God" as being of the utmost importance. "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

There's also the story from the Gospel of Luke that you heard again today about two men who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday evening. Their journey was filled with sadness. They had little hope. As they walked, their conversation was about what had happened in the last few days — the arrest of Jesus, his crucifixion, and the rumors of his resurrection. While they were talking, Jesus joined them, but they did not recognize him. Why? First of all, because they knew he had been crucified. And second, 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, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has taken place in the last few days?" They explained to the stranger what had happened to Jesus and concluded by saying, "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped!

They were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah. They had misunderstood the true meaning of what the Messiah was to be. He was not to be a new kind of King David, a powerful political leader, but rather the love of God in human form. When they arrived in Emmaus, the stranger walked on ahead as if he was going further, but they insisted that he stay with them and have supper. And while they were at the table, the stranger took bread, broke it, and gave it to them. Suddenly, they recognized that the stranger was Jesus, and then, according to Luke's story, he vanished from their sight.

What's the significance of his vanishing once they recognized him? The story wants to remind you that the Spirit of God, as experienced in the Risen Christ, cannot be contained in one place, experience, creed, doctrine, or ritual. No one group, sect, or church has a monopoly on it. No one can control it. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus said, "The Spirit of God is like the wind. It blows where it wills."

As I mentioned in the Easter sermon several weeks ago, the followers of Jesus after Easter experienced his presence in all the old familiar places. It happened again in this story while they were having supper with him. Then, a flood of memories returned, and they knew he was at the table with them.

What does this story tell you today about your walk with God? First of all, note that the road to Emmaus is the road of sadness — a road well-traveled by all human beings who have known disappointment and sadness in their lives. You have walked that road. Maybe you are walking it now. If so, I hope you have a friend who is walking with you.

This story gives you a new understanding of where the Risen Christ is, which is another way of saying where the Spirit of the loving God is. It tells you that the Spirit of the loving God, in the person of the Risen Christ, is walking with you in your journey all through life. And especially, you can know this comforting presence when you are sad and without hope. Sometimes, however, like the two men in Luke's story and the man who dreamed he was walking along the beach with God, you do not realize that God is walking with you or that God has been carrying you until later.

That's certainly been true in my life. It is when I have looked back and remembered that I then realized that God had been walking with me, although when it was happening, I thought it was a stranger walking with me, and sometimes I was not aware that anyone was walking with me.

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 you ponder life's deepest questions and mysteries. He is there when you are seeking answers, and even when you are feeling lost.

This story confirms and strengthens the amazing clue to the presence of God that you find in many places in your life but do not always immediately recognize. It happens all the time. When Mary Magdalene first met the risen Christ, she thought he was the gardener. Days later, when Peter and the other disciples saw him on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, they thought he was a friendly fisherman.

The road to Emmaus in today's world and in your life can take many different forms. You've been on the highway of sadness. Time and time again, you have felt and said, "But I had hoped, I had hoped." Perhaps you hoped for good health through a long life, but you found

yourself troubled and frightened by illness in your younger or middle years. Maybe you had hoped for the companionship of a loved one until the later years of your life, but you have been left alone before you ever thought it could happen. Or 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 commitments.

Maybe you had hoped for children, but they did not come. Perhaps you hoped for a quality in your life that would win the respect of others and satisfy your own need for self-fulfillment, but the pressures and disappointments of life have left you with less than you desired — if not always in the eyes of others, at least in your own. It's possible that your life finds you like those two, walking in sadness along the road to 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 the presence of God. Perhaps, like these two men, you do not at first recognize this stranger because you are so preoccupied with your sadness or your own problems. Or perhaps you have forgotten how to recognize the presence of God.

But notice what happened in the story. When the two men invited the stranger to stay for supper, when they were hospitable, when they were eating together, it was then that they became aware that it was God in the person of Jesus who had been walking with them all along.

Years ago, when I was in seminary and studying the history of Christian doctrine, one way of defining the love of God becoming a human being in Jesus was to say that in Jesus alone was God's Word made flesh. It was a unique event that involved Jesus and no one else. Through the years, I have discovered another way of describing the coming of Jesus into the world. Jesus also came to show any who are willing how God's loving Spirit might become incarnate in them as well. He gave very practical steps in how this could happen. He said, "Love your enemies. It is more blessed to give than to receive. In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you. Do not be anxious about your life."

In teachings like these, Jesus gave his followers everyday activities they could embody. He taught them to take other people's bodies as seriously as they took their own. He taught them to experience the Spirit of God in the lilies of the field and in vines and branches. Not only did he give his followers ideas to think about after he was gone, he also gave them concrete things to do. When they did these things, then they would be aware that he was with them, walking beside them. "As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me."

Here's something more to consider. There may be some of you who do not recognize God walking with you in your life because you are always so concerned about yourself. 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 are always comparing yourself with others. You see no reason to invest yourself in anyone or anything.

Or maybe your life is like a treadmill rather than a walk to Emmaus. There's no time for you to talk with a stranger or anyone else. There's no time to love your neighbor. You are always exhausted but fear slowing down for fear of losing ground. On a treadmill, you never get anywhere — you use up all your energy so you can safely stay in one place. You probably

noticed that it's difficult for a stranger or even a friend to walk with you on a treadmill. I've not seen any treadmills made for two or more people so you can walk and talk side by side.

Or maybe your life, rather than being like a walk with a friend to Emmaus, is more like a ride on a roller coaster. One day, or for several weeks or months, you feel like you're at a high point with God, and then, for a time, you're plunged down low. For a period of time, you're friendly with everyone you meet, and then you snap at people for no apparent reason, or you snap at them because they have snapped at you. Then you are letting others determine how you are going to act. You can be like a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing. Remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your permission.

I don't know which metaphor best describes your life — a walk to Emmaus with a friend, a downward slide, a treadmill, a ride on a roller coaster, or perhaps allowing how you walk to be determined by others.

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 at first recognize. Listen to that stranger, and when evening comes, invite the stranger to dinner, and as you eat together, you could discover the Risen Christ in your midst.

"When he was at 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."

In life, there are moments when you can recognize God and know that you have been walking with God, and then God vanishes from your sight. Why? It does not mean that God is gone from your life. God is also going on 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.