Sunday, April 23, 2006
A ROAD MAP FOR YOUR JOURNEY
John 20:19-29

When Jesus first asked people to follow him, those who accepted did so without being shown a road map for the journey. It was an open-ended invitation. They had no idea where he might lead them. They followed because they were drawn to his teachings and trusted his leadership.

It was not a journey without difficulties. Along the way, his disciples had their doubts and questions. Sometimes they misunderstood his message. They quarreled among themselves as to which one was his favorite. When the going got tough, some denied they even knew him. The journey had its ups and downs.

After his death on Good Friday and even on Easter Sunday evening, they were disillusioned and puzzled. According to the story in the gospel named John, that same Easter Sunday evening, some of his closest disciples were gathered in a room and they locked the doors because they were afraid. They didn't know what to do or believe.

It was in this locked room that they experienced the presence of Jesus among them. Thomas, one of the twelve, was not there. Later the other disciples told him what had happened, that they had experienced the presence of Jesus. Thomas did not believe them. You've heard the phrase "doubting Thomas"—this is where it has its beginning.

According to the story, a week later, the disciples were again together, and now Thomas was with them. Once more, they experienced the presence of Jesus among them. Now Thomas knew it was true. Jesus was alive among them. They thought their journey with Jesus had come to an end, but it was not over. Their journey got a new start with an entirely new direction and with responsibilities they had not expected.

That's the way it is with your journey through life. You never know when it is going to take a different direction. Sometimes you think a journey has ended, but it has only paused and then started again. Road maps cannot tell you specifically how to get to various places. When you look at a map, you still have many choices to make. You have to choose which roads to take. Furthermore, a map cannot tell you what is going to happen along the way.

This weekend and next weekend, a total of 45 young people will be received into membership in this congregation through the Rite of Confirmation. It's another step in their continuing journey to becoming more mature followers of the way of Jesus. It was the experience of the early followers of Jesus, and it has been my experience and that of countless others that the journey of spiritual growth never really ends. It is woven into the ongoing processes of your life.

Most, if not all, of these young people being confirmed are at the age for getting their "driver's permit" or "driver's license." That's why I've chosen the metaphors of a road map and a journey as the basis for this sermon. Road maps are important tools for traveling with an automobile. When you look at the map, you first need to locate where you are on the map. If you don't know your beginning point, it's impossible to get from that point to where you hope to go. On the other hand, it's also true, as Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you are going, chances are you will end up somewhere else."

So where is the beginning point for spiritual growth and maturity? For many people in the Christian tradition, it begins with baptism as an infant. Then, if you were raised in a Christian home, you continue to grow in the faith. Others, even though baptized as infants or young children, have stopping places or detours along the way. Then their journey begins again with the confirmation experience.

For still other people, the beginning point on their spiritual journey is very similar to the first step in all twelve-step recovery programs. (1) You need to admit that you cannot live your life by yourself and that there is a power greater than you. You begin to realize that without this power or energy, your life lacks meaning and direction.

Then you take step number two. (2) You decide to turn your life over to this Higher Power, God, and to be as open as possible to receiving God's Spirit and love in your life.

People arrive at this starting point at different times in life. The Rite of Confirmation is, for many young people, steps one and two. Many people find they need to repeat steps one and two at various points in their life. Some of you will discover that your faith will lose its meaning during your later years in high school or in college. It goes dormant for a time. If you get married and have children, you might begin once again with steps one and two.

For still others, your faith could be dormant for a longer time. Then some tragedy or crisis comes into your life — a loved one dies suddenly, you become ill and wonder if you will recover, your marriage comes apart, one of your children gets into trouble, or you lose your job. Something happens that causes your life to lose its direction, and you begin once again to reestablish your relationship to God, and your spiritual journey continues with steps one and two. William Sloane Coffin, who died last week after a long illness, once said, "Some people say religion is a crutch, but who says you don't limp?"

Over the years, I have met all kinds of individuals who say their education and life experience have convinced them of the folly of spirituality and organized religion. They have said to me that it's all superstitious nonsense, illogical, senseless, and useless. They are partly correct. There is a lot of bad religion in the world. However, a closer analysis reveals that many of the critics of religion have a spiritual understanding that hasn't kept pace with their emotional and intellectual development. They ask how any mature, educated adult could think there's some kind of supernatural being in the sky looking down on them.

I've discovered that many of these critics still have the concept of God they learned when they were children or adolescents, which was when they were last involved with the Christian faith. One of the best little books on this subject is by J. B. Phillips, Your God is Too Small. A more recent book with the same theme is When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning, by Scotty McLennan.

When someone says to me, "I don't believe in God," my response is, "What kind of God don't you believe in?" Almost always, I can go on to say, "I don't believe in that kind of God either."

The point is your spiritual development is not supposed to be static and unchanging. Growth is always possible and desirable, in the same way that it is in other aspects of life.

The most important thing to remember about your spiritual journey is this — continue to grow and mature in your faith. Do not be afraid of new knowledge. Do not be afraid to doubt. Honest

doubt is the starting point for new knowledge. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Apathy, not caring, not being willing to make a commitment — these attitudes are the opposite of faith.

I've had the privilege this past week of reading many of the Confirmation Papers written by members of this year's class. These young people are not afraid to ask good questions. They are not afraid of new knowledge.

One student wrote, "Sometimes I question my belief in God and religion, but I learned that's okay. I learned that by questioning, we could learn from it and gain more knowledge."

Another student wrote, "Confirmation made me think about things I normally don't question — what does God look like? How did we get here? Where did we come from? I learned a lot about community service and that I still have a lot to learn about the Christian religion."

This student wrote: "By being confirmed, I will take a huge step in my faith journey, but it will not end there. I am sure that I will have my faith tested many times before I die, but I feel confident now that through the lessons I have learned in life, I will be able to know where I stand and to help my relationship with God grow even closer."

One student wrote: "The biggest lesson I learned was about grace. I really like the idea of grace being free to everyone. All you have to do is accept it. My faith is much stronger thanks to confirmation, and I'm really glad I did it."

Listen to this student: "My confirmation experience has been one of the most intriguing and important experiences of my entire life. I have never thought more clearly about my life and faith than I do now. I hope this consciousness will never leave my mind. I see the world through clearer eyes. One of the most powerful lessons I have learned is that God is living in each and every one of us, even though some of us have a hard time seeing it. I understand God as being the universal bond between all living things that keeps nature on its course."

Another student wrote: "I absolutely love going to church every Sunday because, for me, I get to learn something new every time."

Here's another suggestion for your journey toward being a mature Christian. Your faith can grow from the heart as much as from your head. Responding to God is more than beliefs or the holding of certain doctrines. You will feel the presence of the Holy in the beauty of creation, in friendship with others, in inspiring music of all kinds, in laughter and fun, and in countless other ways.

You will discover along the way that the presence of God is also found in suffering — your personal suffering and as you suffer with others. Why, when, and how remain a mystery. Suffering happens to everyone at one time or another. The only question is whether it breaks or strengthens you. Will it be a disaster or an opportunity?

My own experience with people who have undergone a lot of suffering is that they often mature faster than others who haven't suffered as much. Their capacity for empathy with others grows deeper.

Here's another important tip for your spiritual journey. God has created life to be good. Your religious faith is meant to bring more fun and joy into your life. The root word of "holiday" is "holy day." Singing, dancing, and feasting all are to be a part of your religious journey. To eat,

drink, and be happy, according to the Bible, are gifts from God. If your religious faith does not add happiness to your life, it's not an authentic faith.

There's a verse in the Bible that says, "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." This congregation has heard me make this statement over and over again. A good summary of what Jesus taught can be put into three, three-word sentences: Life is good. Be happy now. Let it go.

The journey continues. You have chosen the road map of following the way of Jesus. I am convinced that if you follow this map and keep going, your life will not only be filled with fun, but it will give you strength in suffering, hope for the future, and your life will make the world better. Amen.