



Threshold to a New Life

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Luke 24:13-35

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Years ago, I would regularly travel through the beautiful Sierra Nevada Mountains from California to Nevada. However, one trip turned out to be quite different from all the others as the brilliant blue sky turned grey and then black. By the time I got to the top of the pass, I was driving in inches of water. The scenery was irrelevant as I couldn't see anything due to the sheets of rain pounding my windshield. I finally had to pull over to the side of the road, stop, and wait for this storm to pass. My journey had turned out to be so much different than what I had hoped or expected it to be.

I think that experience stands out in my mind because it is a metaphor. Life is a journey. We all have hopes, dreams, and expectations about what our journey will be like, but at some point, we will run into a storm that may bring feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, danger, depression, and even despair. I've had many of those kinds of experiences in my life. This year, we have all experienced a kind of storm as a worldwide pandemic has brought life as we know it to a stop.

That is why I chose the beautiful account from Luke 24 that tells of two companions on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-16). We can assume these two companions were among the larger group of Jesus' followers who went to Jerusalem for Passover. They expected a mountain-top experience believing Jesus was going to overthrow Rome,

free God's people from oppression, and be crowned the Messiah, the true King of Israel. Instead they descended into the valley of death as they saw their friend, their leader and Lord crucified. But they have heard news that some have seen him alive, risen from the dead. Can it be true?

In her book *Life Together in Christ*, Ruth Haley Barton describes well what they may have been experiencing: “The disciples were suspended somewhere between loss and possible gain, grief and possible joy, profound human suffering and perhaps some kind of redemption, dashed hopes and maybe daring to hope again. They were wrung out—emotionally, spiritually and physically. They had been powerless to prevent the events of the last days, and they were powerless now to do anything to change their situation. *The road from Jerusalem to Emmaus was the road between the now and the not-yet.*

“Although they were probably not aware of it, these disciples were in what Richard Rohr calls ‘liminal space’—a particular spiritual position where human beings hate to be, but where the biblical God is always leading them. The Latin root *limen* literally means ‘threshold,’ referring to that needed transition when we are moving from one place or one state of being to another.

“Liminal space usually induces some sort of inner crisis: you have left the tried and true (or it has left you), and you have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. This is Abraham leaving his home country and his father's house

for a land he did not yet know. It is Joseph in the pit. It is the Israelites wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. It is Jonah in the belly of the fish. It is Mary weeping at Jesus' tomb. It is the disciples huddled in the upper room between the crucifixion and the resurrection, betwixt and between the life they had known and whatever was supposed to come next. This was a time for intimate emotions and dangerous questions. Maybe something new and wonderful was in the works, but who knew?"

It's in this liminal space, this threshold, that Jesus appears to these two companions and enters the conversation about their crisis (Luke 24:17-24): There is irony in this story. They think Jesus is the only person in Jerusalem who *doesn't* know when in fact he is the *only* person who truly understands the significance of what has happened.

We can learn from Jesus, who doesn't jump in right away to try to fix them or make them feel better or share his own perspective or experience. Rather, he comes alongside them, asks good questions, listens to what they want to share about their journey, and empathizes with their emotions.

Jesus recognizes the crisis and accompanying sadness and grief that is part of their journey, and he knows that grief needs time.

Not only are they grieving the death of their leader and friend, they have to grapple with the violence and horror of a world and political and religious system in which this kind of death could happen. And they are grieving because they have lost a way of life. Their hopes, their dreams, their expectations about what life would look like, their whole future died with Jesus.

A key phrase is “but we had hoped.” “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel” (or to set Israel free). Proverbs says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.” These disciples were heartsick. Crisis has turned their world upside down.

Part of their journey of grief is letting go of who they expected Jesus to be to receive Jesus for who he really is. That’s part of our journey, too. Everyone experiences losses and storms on the journey of life. But not everyone does the hard, necessary work of grieving that leads to letting go and letting God lead us through a threshold to new life.

As I said before, everyone in the country and the world is at a threshold as we wait for the roll-out of vaccines to reach a point so that our lives can to return to some semblance of a new normal. We as a church are on the threshold of meeting and welcoming a new senior pastor.

And of course, many of us are on personal thresholds as we become new parents or grandparents, launch our children into adulthood, begin new jobs or retire, or receive treatment and wait for healing to come. It's in that uncomfortable place betwixt and between in which we too can encounter the risen Lord who can lead us into deeper faith and new life.

Jesus listens to their story and attends to their emotions for some time. Only then does he go on to offer correction from Scripture (Luke 24:25-27). The key is the phrase "slow of heart to believe." Faith is the key to the Christian life. To believe is to grab hold of something new—something true, yes, something better. But in order to grab hold of something new, we also have to let go. Faith is letting go of our false beliefs or narratives and self-reliance to trust in, rely on, believe in Jesus—who he is and what he has done for us in his death and resurrection.

I remember one of my first real experiences of grief was graduating from high school and leaving the family, home, and community where I had lived for all 18 years of my life. I had been a big fish in a small pond and was about to become a small fish in a big pond. I was grieving the loss of the only life I knew, and I was anxious, even terrified about the future.

What I didn't really know is that I was on the threshold to new life. While I grew up going to church regularly, I

knew some things *about* God rather than actually *knowing* Him. So I went to school to get an education and to find God, whatever that meant.

But as I look back, I see how Jesus found me and brought new companions into my life who helped me see how I was slow to believe. I needed someone to teach me and give me correction from Scripture. This was a process that happened over time, but here is some of what I learned.

We were created to have a relationship with God. But that relationship has been broken. Each one of us has turned away and gone our own way through our active rebellion, passive indifference, or self-reliance to gain God's favor. Romans 3:23 says: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin is an archery term, and it means missing the bullseye. Sin is falling short of God's holiness. "The wages of sin is death," or spiritual separation from God. We have a problem that we can't solve. That's why we need a savior. We need Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Grace is unmerited favor or an undeserved gift.

Grace is Jesus accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. In *his* death, Jesus paid the penalty

of our disobedience. In *his* resurrection, Jesus overcame our greatest human problems of sin and death once and for all.

This is good news. Faith isn't about trying harder and doing more to be good enough or to earn our way to God and the good life He wants for us. Faith is believing in, relying on, trusting in who Jesus is as the Son of God and what he has already done for us in his life, death, and resurrection. Trusting Jesus is the threshold to new life, a new relationship with Jesus.

As I let go of trying harder to trust Jesus, my anxiety and fear were transformed into a deep experience of love, joy, and peace. It didn't all happen at once, but as I read and studied the Scriptures myself and with others, my trust and confidence in Jesus grew. I have learned from experience that faith flourishes when our false narratives are transformed by the power of the risen Christ and the truth of Scriptures. That's what the journey of life is all about.

After what must have been a long and interesting conversation, these two companions invite Jesus to stay with them. These disciples were extending hospitality common in their culture by welcoming the stranger and sharing a meal. But it's in this intimate, relational moment of sharing a meal and hearing Jesus say these familiar words that they experience a deep communion that leads to recognition (Luke 24:28-32). When Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave

the bread that “their eyes were opened.” Undoubtedly they had seen Jesus do this many times as they followed him. It’s this experience that leads them to finally see Jesus for who he really was—the crucified Messiah and the risen Lord. And right at the moment of recognition, Jesus disappears.

That seems so anticlimactic. But again, this story is so true to our own experiences of life. I have learned in life that mountaintop experiences rarely last long because it is our human tendency to want to trust the experience rather than Jesus himself.

I shared earlier about how God led me through the threshold to new life and a relationship with God. My college years were a greenhouse time of spiritual growth for me. But the summer before my senior year of college, another storm hit when my older brother was killed in an Air Force jet crash.

That last year of college was hard as I had to process the greatest loss of my life until then. The phrase I clung to was, “Don’t doubt in the darkness what God has revealed in the light.” I learned what it meant to walk by faith and not by sight. This proved to be another threshold that ultimately led to deeper confidence in God and to a new life—a call to ministry.

This leads to the end of our passage for today: Commission to share with others (Luke 24:33-35). I find the actions of these two companions so inspiring. Their world had been turned upside down. They are grieving and undoubtedly tired from a long distance, but they “get up and return to Jerusalem.” Jesus’ resurrection changed everything. They are so filled with inexplicable joy in seeing the risen Christ that all they could do was get up and go share this good news with others.

This passage challenges a common misconception in our day to think that faith is private, to be kept to ourselves. Faith is very personal but never private. The good news of Jesus’ resurrection and new life wasn’t just for them or even just their community. God used the bold witness of His first followers to turn their world upside down as they shared the good news of the crucified and risen Lord.

So what? So what difference does the resurrection make in my life? I don’t know where you are in your faith journey. I don’t know what storms or losses you are personally facing. What I do know is that God has an invitation for each one of us today. Maybe one of these three words is for you: know, grow, go.

So the first word is *know*. Some of you here today may see yourselves as spiritual but not religious. Please understand, religion is what humans do to reach God. I’m

not talking about religion but rather having a relationship with Jesus.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus is speaking: “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” This is a picture of an intimate, interactive relationship. Jesus is standing at the door of your life, the threshold, and wants to begin a relationship. If you want to know Jesus, open the door. Faith is the hand that reaches out to open the door. Jesus promises that he will come in.

The second word is *grow*. Some may have started the journey of faith but feel stuck for some reason. We cultivate a relationship with Jesus by spending time with him. Prayer is simply having a conversation with the Lord. Reading and studying the truth of God’s word is the way we listen and receive much-needed correction from Scripture. We also need companions for the journey, spiritual friends who can help us grow in our relationship with Jesus.

We invite you to explore the many learning communities we have for all ages and stages on the journey of faith. We even have support groups and Stephen Ministers to come alongside those experiencing losses and the storms of life.

The third word is *go*. Some of us here may have been on this journey of faith for a long time, even growing in the

community with others. But maybe we need to “get up and go.” If the resurrection makes a difference in my life, it is meant to make a difference in the lives of others as well as we share the Good News in both word and deed with those who do not know.

So get up and go make disciples. Get up and go by welcoming the stranger into your life and group. Get up and go share the Good News of the risen Christ with the people in your life who don't know him. Get up and go teach all that Jesus commanded as you mentor others who are younger in age or faith.

Where are you on your faith journey? What is God's invitation to you—to know Him by beginning a relationship, to grow by cultivating that relationship, or to go and share the Good News with others? We as pastors and staff are available to help you name your place so you respond to Jesus on your journey of faith.

We are in a unique time in history and in our church. We are on the threshold to new life. In the weeks ahead, we will we will explore Jesus' last words to his disciples, we will learn important lessons for our lives about what it means to follow the risen, reigning Lord Jesus right here, right now in the midst of our ordinary life in this extraordinary time. We hope you will join us for this journey.