

Title: It is Prayed By Walking  
Date: 4/23/2023 (Easter 3, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Exodus 17:1-7](#); [Romans 5:1-11](#); [John 4:5-42](#); [Psalm 95](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/cojvvz-maUg?t=1336>

The cords of death entangled me;  
the grip of the grave took hold of me; \*  
I came to grief and sorrow.  
Then I called upon the Name of the LORD: \*  
"O LORD, I pray you, save my life."  
**Amen.**

Emmaus...is an unremarkable village. From the Bible, the only thing we know about Emmaus is that it's seven miles away from Jerusalem. All the churches in the Holy Land are built on spots where key stories are believed to have taken place: where the angel spoke to Mary, where Jesus was born, where the four friends lowered their friend through the roof so Jesus could heal him. You get the point. Though people may not agree on the exact spot where the story happened, they can at least find the town on a map. Look, there's Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or Capernaum. In the Holy Land, there are **three** different places that claim to be the site of Emmaus.<sup>1</sup>

It feels like an odd choice of destination for these two disciples. When someone well-known dies, people usually rush to pay their respects at the place where they died or to places closely associated with their life.

As far as I can tell, the village of Emmaus was not associated with Jesus during his lifetime. It appears only once in the gospels, in this story. Maybe that's why they picked it. Given the very public and very deliberate way Jesus was killed, they probably didn't feel safe going to a place other people associated with Jesus.

If they couldn't go to places that brought them closer to Jesus,  
they could do things that brought Jesus closer to them.

Because Jesus went away and prayed;  
they gave themselves permission to go away from the others to find their own way to pray.

Because Jesus ate with those that most people wouldn't think to eat with;  
they decided to share their meal with a stranger they met on the road.

I'll circle back to that, but first I want to touch on death and grief. That part of the story goes by so quickly in Holy Week. **We** can move from crucifixion to resurrection in a short time because we know that the story of Jesus doesn't end at the cross, but the disciples didn't know that.

After the crucifixion, nothing was the same for them. No matter how Jesus tried to prepare them, when the end came, it was still abrupt. One night he was sitting with them at dinner, the next night he was sealed in a tomb. There is no softening that blow.

Death hits each person differently, as do the grief and sorrow that follow. And hits us it does, whether gently or steadily, forcefully or at random intervals. It's not something that just works itself out. It doesn't happen in sequential stages that we can cross out. It washes over us when we expect it **and** when we least expect it. The presence **and** the absence of the person who died stays with us in some form.

Death has a way of shifting those who remain into a parallel universe. The world around them is the same, yet the world around them is different.

I wonder if the sheer normalcy of the life flowing around the disciples was too much to reconcile with the grief and sorrow in their hearts. A prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people had been condemned to death and crucified. How could anyone go on as if nothing **had** changed?

The chief priests and the leaders were the ones who handed him over to die. How could anyone go on as if nothing **needed** to change?

The thing with crowds is, before surveillance cameras and cell phone cameras, before pictures and videos are posted on social media so individuals could be identified, before people felt they had to hide their hate under a hood, the people who were part of the crowd could just melt back into their normal lives, with none the wiser.

As the disciples walked around Jerusalem, it would be hard to tell who had been part of the crowd that shouted "Crucify him!" It would be hard for them not to wonder where the next threat would come from.

So, as we heard in last week's gospel, some of them decided to stay behind locked doors. Two of them, as we heard in this week's gospel, decided to go for a walk.

On average, at a relaxed pace, it takes most people two hours and twenty minutes to walk seven miles.<sup>2</sup> If they were running away, they could have gone farther than that in a day. They just needed some distance for a bit.

To put it in context, this story takes place after the women had already gone to the tomb and brought back a message from the angels. Then the men who didn't believe the women had to go and see for themselves. Then **they** came back to tell everyone that they had also seen an empty tomb, but not the angels.

These two disciples had all this information before they set off for Emmaus. They also had all the information Jesus had shared with them, including the prediction that he would die and then rise on the third day. I imagine they were one part hopeful, one part doubtful, one part sad, one part cautiously joyful, and a lot confused. Again, they didn't know what we know, and there was a lot to sort through.

So, they did something that would bring Jesus closer to them. They went away to pray.

There is not one right way to pray, and different methods may work better for different seasons of life. Sometimes we pray by staying still; we sit or kneel. Sometimes we pray with our hands, by knitting or drawing, writing or cooking. We can also pray with our feet.

There is a saying attributed to St. Augustine, “It is solved by walking.” One way to do that is for the walking to be the prayer. In Adult Education today, we will talk about walking the Labyrinth. A labyrinth is not a maze. There is one way in and one way out. The physical movement of walking into the center helps us gradually lay down our burdens and distractions so that we can focus on a single question or a single prayer. The physical movement of walking out of the center helps ease our transition back into the world.. That’s a inward facing kind of prayer.

What the disciples did was a very outward facing kind of prayer. They not only walked, they walked together. Not only did they walk together, they talked. Not only did they walk and talk, when a stranger came alongside them, they invited him into the conversation.

They didn’t try to hold it all inside. They didn’t try to keep to themselves. They didn’t feel like they needed to know all the answers.

They stayed open and curious. They listened as the stranger interpreted the story they just told him back to them. He put it in a different context. This wasn’t just about them and their teacher. He helped to remind them that they were part of a bigger story, a longer history.

Then they invited him to stay for a meal. It was getting dark, and it’s what Jesus would have done. It was another way to feel as if Jesus was still with them. And because they did, they had the chance to see the risen Christ, even if just for a moment.

These days, there can be so many barriers to getting to know other people. There are physical barriers. We are separated by the walls of our cars and the walls of our houses or apartments. We wear earbuds and look down at our phones. We can be in the same place without really being present to one another.

We are separated by cultural barriers. How many of you know your neighbors? How many of you enjoy talking to strangers? Our brains are wired to quickly identify who might be a friend and who might be a threat so that we can respond just as quickly. Those kinds of assumptions can range from helpful to not beneficial to outright deadly.

You might be wondering why I haven’t mentioned the Iftar dinner. That’s like the most obvious connection between this gospel and something that happened this week. When we break bread together with strangers, we have the chance to see God in them, end of story.

As I was driving away, I wondered how I would have felt in their position. How would I feel if I had to take part in events like this not just for learning, but for safety and survival. Dialogue Institute was founded in 2002. I don't know for sure, but I would guess it had to do with 911 and how Muslims and people who looked Muslim were attacked and harassed afterwards. This is their response to death, to grief and sorrow and fear. This is their outward facing prayer.

They put on dinners like this so that people like us can know for ourselves there is more to being Muslim than what the news or movies tend to show us. They do this so the foreign can become familiar and even friend, for themselves and for us. We can learn a lot from them about fasting and praying, and I hope we find ways to walk alongside each other before Ramadan next year.

In moments of death, grief, sorrow, fear, our prayer may guide us inward. That is comforting and necessary for healing and for building strength. And, when it's time, when the Holy Spirit gives us a nudge, when we feel that burning in our hearts, may our prayers guide us outward to cross boundaries and barriers as Jesus did, so that we may be open and curious enough to take to heart a different perspective that helps us reframe the stories we've been told and the stories we've been telling ourselves. This way lies resurrection.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2019-09-03/ty-article-magazine/.premium/israeli-archaeologists-may-have-found-emmaus-where-jesus-appeared-after-crucifixion/0000017f-e14f-d7b2-a77f-e34f81ad0000>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.enter2run.com/how-long-to-walk-7-miles/>