

3 Easter A April 26, 2020
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On the Road
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You're the soul who understands, the scars that made me who I am. Through the drifting sands of time, I got your back and you got mine. If you bear a heavy load, I'll be your wheels, I'll be the road. I'll see us through the thick and thin, for love and loss until the end. Cause you carried me with you, from the highest of the peaks, to the darkness of the blue. I was just too blind to see, like a lighthouse in a storm you were always guiding me. Yeah, it's true, you carried me with you.

This is the first half of singer Brandi Carlile's theme song for the last movie my family and I went to see before the shelter in place mandates closed movie theaters. The movie is Disney/Pixar's newest animated adventure simply called *Onward*. I was the one who wanted to watch it because I love stories about journeys, epic quests, and road trips. Because whether it's King Arthur's legend, *The Hobbit* whose other title is *or There and Back Again*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or more modern versions like *Star Wars*, what I love about journey stories is the part where the heroes discover something far more valuable than whatever they were seeking. As Indiana Jones' father put it when his son asked him what he found after their quest for the Holy Grail was completed, he summed it up in one word: "illumination."

Without giving too many details away, that is exactly what two teenage brothers named Barley and Ian who were grieving the loss of their father discover in *Onward*. Like all quest stories, what they discover was with them all the time, it is just that – as the song says – they were too blind to see it at first. It was only after many adventures along the way that their eyes were opened, like in today's Gospel, where two disciples found their eyes opened after a journey on the road with the Risen Jesus.

Today's Gospel account of two of Jesus' disciples on the road to a place called Emmaus has that in common with journey stories. In fact, several scholars and preachers have commented that the Bible is full of stories about extraordinary walks or journeys. In the very beginning, in one of the first stories in the first book in the Bible, Genesis, God walked with the first people in the garden in the cool of the evening. There are other stories about walks and journeys in the Old Testament, or first part of the Bible: like the liberating walk Moses took the Israelites on when they left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, or the long walk or journey through the wilderness Moses led God's People on to the promised land. Joshua's most well-known journey

was a walk around the city of Jericho's walls. In the New Testament the author of Luke's Gospel tells about Joseph and Mary going on a journey to Bethlehem. Later in the Gospels Jesus took a walk on water and encountered many opportunities to show God's love as he journeyed to towns and cities between Nazareth and Jerusalem. Outside Jerusalem Jesus took a different kind of walk and carried a cross to Golgotha, that walk is so unforgettable it has its own name: the *Via Dolorosa*, the way of sorrow. Paul had an extraordinary walk or journey to Damascus, and of course, today we encounter two of Jesus' disciples on their road trip to Emmaus.

It seems I am not the only one who appreciates a good journey. A theory I've heard is that the Bible is one long account of God constantly inviting humanity to go for a walk or a journey with God. The Incarnation was God becoming flesh and journeying with humanity and the Risen Christ is the revelation that no matter where we are, God is with us. And the Holy Spirit calls us to go where God wants us to go. I'm not sure how theologically profound that theory is, but it does make sense when we look at today's Gospel where we and the Risen Jesus join two of his disciples on a journey. Like the brothers in the new animated movie *Onward*, these two disciples are dealing with their grief and "their eyes were kept from recognizing Jesus."

This is also something that all journey stories have in common; the heroes can't recognize what they have with them or when they encounter someone of significance. There are lots of reasons for this, depending on the story, but even in the Bible stories, the people God wanted to walk with didn't always recognize God's presence. God didn't always appear as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Sometimes it took a miraculous substance like manna or Moses striking a rock and water coming out for people to remember God was with them.

It is probable the author of Luke's Gospel wants us to remember this trope when the disciples didn't recognize Jesus, because it may be pointing to something important. The disciples might not have recognized him because the Risen Jesus was physically different from the earthly Jesus. Or maybe for whatever reason, these disciples, like heroes on a quest, weren't ready to see him yet. And the Risen Jesus seems to be okay with that.

Jesus didn't force himself on these two disciples when they didn't recognize him. Instead, he walked with them on their journey, patiently listening as they processed their grief and disappointment. Then he shared the Scriptures with them, telling them once again stories I am sure they probably already knew, stories about other times God had journeyed with God's people only now he told them through his experience of new life, of resurrection life.

Sometimes we can be hard on the disciples for not recognizing or seeing what was right in front of them, even when he started telling them the stories they knew.

But journey stories remind us that is something we all can be guilty of. Sometimes we are just too sad or confused or want whatever it is we want so desperately, are distracted or busy or have such specific expectations we can't see what we already have or recognize who is with us. There are times any of us can miss when Love is right in front of us. Today's Gospel also reminds us the resurrection of Jesus wasn't easy to understand or see, even for those who had been with Jesus during his earthly life. Perhaps the Risen Jesus is wise enough to recognize that sometimes people need to first lament or work through their feelings before they are ready and can recognize new or resurrection life. That recognition is part of a process, not something that happens instantaneously.

The amazing part of today's Gospel is that whether or not they were ready to recognize him, the Risen Jesus stayed with his disciples on their journey, both their outward and inward journey.

Maybe that is the good news we need on this Sunday, when we all find ourselves on a very strange journey of the covid19 pandemic together apart. Where we too may be grieving what we have lost, confused by what we see and hear, fighting our expectations, or maybe even beginning to feel hopeless. Times like this can make it hard to see what is right in front of us, and journey stories like today's Gospel can help us remember that whether we see it or not, resurrection life is right here with us. God is still calling us to walk with God, albeit now that is going to look different than it did even a few months ago. If we can't recognize that just yet, or define what that specifically will look like, that is okay. We're not on that part of the journey yet. Journey stories remind us when undertaking a journey or a quest, we can't skip parts, take short cuts, or get to the end before we've gone the distance. Journeys, like life, are a process that you cannot hurry or rush through. You have to see it through to the end. We can trust the Holy Spirit is with us along the way, patiently listening to our laments, waiting until we are ready to reveal what God is calling us to during these extraordinary times. We will get there, in time.

Today's Gospel also reminds us the hopefulness of stories, especially journey stories like so many walks through the Bible, stories that remind us God is with us and stories that may speak to us a little differently as we live through a global pandemic and have to make so many changes to our lives, and so many sacrifices for the health of our communities and our country. Changes and sacrifices are also essential parts of quest or journey stories, they help the hero get closer to recognizing what is truly important.

These stories might help open our eyes to resurrection life, even when we can't gather together for the breaking of the bread and sharing in Holy Communion. There may be other ways our eyes might be opened to realize God is still guiding us, "like a

lighthouse in storm”, as the song says. Perhaps we are being called during this season to steep ourselves in the stories of scriptures, and journey with the stories through this pandemic. We can let these stories guide us, challenge us, comfort us, and be a way the Holy Spirit might “be our wheels and be our road, and carry us through the thick and thin, for love and loss until the end”.

Even though I have been ordered by the Bishop to shelter in place, I am still on this journey with you. Because I don’t just love a good journey story, I also love you, as God loves you, and is right here with us, whether we recognize it or not. All we can do is trust, and keep going, Onward.

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus: Be with us on the way, that we may know you in the scriptures, in the breaking of bread, and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen

– *St. Augustine’s Prayer Book page 85*