

Changed Direction

Exodus 3: 1-12a Luke 24: 13-35

As we continue forward from Easter, our task is similar to what the disciples experienced. We're faced with the same question that they were: what does the resurrection mean?

As we said previously, everything has changed. The resurrection takes the desperate sadness of the Good Friday crucifixion and changes everything with unexpected new life. Whatever the disciples had assumed was blown away on Easter morning.

A pastor tells how, when he was a kid, his eyesight was terrible.

Still, he ran the 100-yard dash in track in high school. He couldn't see the finish line. When he ran the race, he would run as fast as he possibly could until he saw the finish line. His eyesight was so poor that by the time he saw the finish line, the race was over. So he would just run full speed all the way all the time.

Then, in his senior year, he got contact lenses. And then his problems began.

Now he could see the finish line from the starting blocks, thanks to these contact lenses. That also meant that he had to relearn how to run. When before he ran like a wild man in the dark, now he had to learn to look forward, use pacing and timing and watch his stride, concentrating on the finish line. Now he needed to keep his eye on that finish line to run a productive race.

When the disciples were simply following Jesus around, listening (kind of) to his teachings, witnessing his healings, seeing how he defied custom and tradition in seeking to advance the Kingdom of God, this wasn't too difficult. Jesus set the agenda and they followed along. With Jesus gone, resurrected, and ... and ... well, now what?

For us, we do the good sheepy thing. We follow each other into church, we follow the bulletin's order of worship, we got to brunch. We have it a bit harder because we have to figure things out for ourselves, and not be content with what has been spoon-fed to us since we were children. We need to come to terms with the resurrected Jesus, too.

In both cases – the disciples of Jesus who were contemporary with him, and for the disciples of Jesus today – there is an explicit need to change direction. The difference is that Jesus' first disciples didn't have any choice; the resurrection thrust change upon them. For us, we take the resurrection for granted. It's 2000 year old news, still good news, but not new news. We need to understand the resurrection and turn ourselves to align with it.

There are lots of folks in scripture who have God enter their lives and make them change direction. Abraham, Noah, Elijah, David, Jonah, and the list goes on – God intervened in their lives and sent them in a new direction.

Another one would be Moses. Today's scripture has Moses and the burning bush. Background: we know Moses was saved from the Nile, grew up in Pharaoh's palace, has that "Moses" name – a royal name among pharaohs – but he has Hebrew heritage. As a young man, he killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew. Others saw what he had done and he fled Egypt as a fugitive. He ends up as a shepherd for Jethro, a Midianite priest.

Life for Moses is now on the quiet track. He's had enough excitement. Hiding out with Jethro's sheep in the middle of nowhere isn't so bad. It's a lot better than being hunted down in Egypt or rotting in a prison for challenging the status quo, or losing one's head, literally. He was out of Egypt, and good riddance.

Until one day, he's out with the sheep and he sees a burning bush. A burning bush in that incredible desert heat actually was **not** so unusual. That it didn't burn up or burn out made it quite a curiosity. So Moses goes over to check it out. When God realized Moses had taken the bait, God reels him in: "Moses! Moses!" Moses replies, "Here I am!" God tells him to come no closer for he is on holy ground and this is the God of your ancestors talking. Moses is a bit more anxious now.

God goes on to relate how he has seen the misery and suffering of his people, the Hebrews, and how the Egyptians harshly oppress them. God intends to rescue them and bring them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land currently occupied by several powerful clans, but whatever; Moses doesn't really care at this point. God is suddenly concerned about his people, and God has a plan. Good for God – you go, man.

Then God drops a bomb; "So now, go" Moses looks around to see who God is talking to. "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

By now, Moses realizes that God is actually issuing this command to him, and God actually seems to be serious about this. The text has Moses complaining, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring your people out of Egypt?" Moses might also have reminded God, "Hey, I am only one man and Pharaoh is king of the greatest empire of the western world right now. And for another thing, you may not realize that I left Egypt in a big hurry, and I'm in no hurry to return and get tossed into prison or get executed. I'm sure you can find someone else."

God isn't budging; "I will be with you all the time."

Moses tries again: "Suppose I go and say to them, 'God has sent me,' and they ask, 'What God? What's his name?' Then what do I say?"

God tells Moses to say, "*I am who I am*; tell them *I am* has sent me."

They will continue this back-and-forth for quite a while with Moses making excuses and God working around them. God is not taking “no” for an answer, and Moses eventually relents. His nice job being shepherd for Jethro is coming to an abrupt (and bizarre) end as Moses changes direction and heads back into the very place he has absolutely no desire to go, and get in the face of someone who he doesn’t want anything to do with.

God is going to take this nutty idea and make it work. Moses’ job is to be faithful. God doesn’t give him any options either, but Moses discovers, despite all the difficulties, that God is faithful to his promise. It is simply up to Moses to be faithful to God.

When we turn to the passage from Luke, we join two disciples making the smart move; they’re getting out of Jerusalem before they get swept up in a persecution. Their direction is perfectly clear, totally understandable, and seems irrevocable.

As they head out on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples were having quite a discussion about what had been happening in Jerusalem. They didn’t notice a fellow coming up and joining them in their walk. I’m sure this was disconcerting. I’m sure you’ve had the experience of going along in earnest conversation with somebody and then suddenly realize that someone else is close by. The stranger asks what they’re talking about, and they explain all of what had happened to this guy who doesn’t seem to know anything. They tell him about the promise, the crucifixion, the strange tales of an empty tomb, visions of angels, and the whole thing.

They showed their disappointment when they said, *but we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel*. It seems the “road to Emmaus” had history in the Maccabean War around 140 BC. It was the site of a major victory for the rebels. In retaliation, the Romans burned Emmaus to the ground. The image the “road to Emmaus” is laden with recent history of violent rebellion in a nationalistic cause. That some disciples are on **this** road shows symbolically that they’re on the *wrong* road, not the road that Jesus had called them to walk.

That would explain why the stranger gives them a bit of a tongue-lashing for being such doubters, for having forgotten the story of the master, and for failing to recognize what was really happening. The stranger was teaching them, trying to get them headed in the right direction.

The stranger acted like he was continuing along the road when the two decided to stop and call it a day – it was getting late. They invited the stranger to join them, still not knowing him to be anything more than a curious but intriguing stranger. Once again, we encounter the theme of blindness to the reality of the Lord that was so prevalent in John. It’s evident here, too.

As they sit together at the table, in the breaking of the bread, they recognize Jesus. They’re healed of their blindness – and then Jesus immediately disappears! How confusing is that? They’re healed of their blindness as to who this guy is, and then when they recognize him, he disappears.

Anyway, the two disciples decide to return to Jerusalem, still a place of threat and danger. But now these formerly intimidated disciples seem renewed and inspired to serve the Lord whom they encountered. Jesus may never have told them, 'Change direction. Turn around and go back to Jerusalem.' They knew that everything had changed with the resurrection and that there was something new that they understood required their response. They hardly knew *what* this new thing was, but they understood enough to change direction and follow faithfully into a setting that they had been running from only moments before.

The resurrection faith needs its witnesses. The resurrection faith counts on its witnesses who can say, "This is the way; walk in it." That means understanding how everything is changed. It means understanding a call to change our direction from the common paths that lead nowhere, and get in step with Jesus' path toward the Kingdom.

We can step into the way of the Lord and walk in it, but we have to change direction from vain and futile paths. These paths implore us to gain for ourselves what the world tells us that we need to have. Witnesses bring the focus back to faithfulness, restoring sight to the blind and bringing needed words to deaf ears. Witnesses who understand what's changed point toward the Kingdom and change their direction toward it.

This orientation puts the faithful in step with Jesus, reaching out to the outcast, raising up the poor, bringing healing to the sick and struggling, and seeking a level of justice that the world has always had great difficulty fathoming.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus reveals in his ministry is nothing the world has ever been comfortable with. But it is the reason for the resurrection. It is why Moses can go forward to confront Pharaoh, why Cleopas and his fellow disciple head back into danger in Jerusalem. It is that God is with them, and God has them covered.

Walking with the Lord in the light of the resurrection puts us on a changed course. We understand our service to the Lord and know that our work and witness is for his Kingdom of new life for all.