

## Those Near And Far

This beautiful story of the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus is probably one of the most familiar Bible stories to many of us.

The long walk from Jerusalem, back to the world as it seemingly must be.

Cold.

Violence-filled.

Hopeless.

Then, suddenly interrupted by an unexpected encounter with Jesus.

We can take it as a heartwarming, sentimental and lovely story — that doesn't seem to ask too much of us.

But something I've never noticed before caught my eye this week about those two disciples.

It's this!

Why on earth are these two disciples deciding to take off on a long walk to a far away village right after hearing that Jesus' tomb is empty?

How do you leave town in the midst of such a report?

Why do you conclude that everything has come to a terrible end when something as startling as the empty tomb has just been reported to you?

And thinking about these questions, I wonder if Luke, who wrote this gospel story, might have had something more in mind than simply recounting a sweet tale of these two disciples encountering Jesus.

Perhaps what Luke is aiming at is to help the early church come to see that Jesus is present to not only those who stay with him; but that Jesus also searches out and stays with those who have wandered away.

Even those who have, apparently, intentionally abandoned the believing community.

That Jesus comes to everyone, searches for everyone, finds everyone, because he is **for everyone** and he is determined to **have everyone**.

Perhaps that's part of what Luke is trying to share with us this morning.

So let's take a moment and look at the reach of God in Christ.

Let's take a few moments to consider the implications of a God who is **for** the whole world, who is **for** everyone who ever lived.

Several years ago an evangelical pastor named Rob Bell wrote a book entitled "God Wins."

In that book he argues that, in the end, God will have all of us.

The phrase that defines that kind of theology is "universal salvation."

And because he wrote that book, Rob Bell was promptly fired by his congregation.

Because the notion of “universal salvation” is controversial in just about every single Christian denomination; even among us Episcopalians who are so proud of our inclusivity.

There seems to be something innate in human nature about the need to believe that some will be saved, and some will be damned forever.

And yet, throughout all of Holy Scripture, from the Older Testament to the New, there are repeated hints that God is intending to have everyone who ever lived.

From Genesis:

“**All the nations** of the earth shall be blessed...” (Gen. 18:18)

To the Psalms:

“**All nations** whom God has made will come and worship before Him” (Ps. 86:9)

From the prophet Isaiah:

“The Lord will lay bare His Holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and **all the ends of the earth** shall see the salvation of our God.” (Isaiah 52:10)

To the prophet Joel:

God’s Spirit “will be poured out **on all flesh.**” (Joel 2:28)

From Paul's letter to the Romans:

"For God has bound **everyone** over to disobedience so that he may have mercy **on them all.**" Romans 11:32.

To Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

"Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that **one died for all, and therefore all died.**" (2 Cor. 5:14)

From the Gospel of St John:

Jesus "is the true light which gives light to **every person...**" (John 1:9)

To the Acts of the Apostles:

In Jesus Christ is "the **restoration of all things**, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21)

Granted, this is a big bite to chew, especially for a Sunday morning homily.

But hopefully, some of this morning's chewing will lead to a longer conversation amongst ourselves, and with God, about this crucial aspect of our faith:

Who shall be saved — and how does it happen?

And yes, I can hear your objections bubbling up as you listen to this!

Some may be thinking:

If all are saved, then why are we cooling our jets here week in and week out?

Others may object that if there's no eternal punishment, where is the justice in this world?

The first objection: why are we cooling our jets here week in and week out if "all's well that ends well," is the easier of the two objections to answer.

How many people live their lives on the edge of suicidal thoughts, with rampant anxiety and a nauseous generalized sense of fear?

The popularity of fear-based politics and fear-based media tells us: a lot of folks are trapped in that boat!

The reason we are here week in and week out is that we get to leave the rickety boat of fear and anxiety and "me first" for the assurance of life — lived in the flow.

By taking our faith seriously, by taking the time to really see other people, finding in humble service the shining face of God, all of this leads us to places where we can experience deeply the assurance that "all shall be well." Julian of Norwich.

In other words, faith put into practice is its own reward.

It's the truth every person who ventures out to help others discovers:

“I receive much more than I give.”

That’s why we’re here every week.

That’s why we do what we do.

The second objection to universal salvation is harder.

How does actual justice get done?

After all, we live in a world where “half of the harm that is done is done because people want to feel important.

They don’t mean to do harm — but the harm doesn’t interest them.

Or they don’t see it — or they justify it — because they’re absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.” T.S. Elliot, modified.

Think of the old white man who shot the black teen in the head for merely ringing the wrong doorbell.

Think of the Oklahoma commissioner caught on tape last week wishing for a return to the days of vigilantism and lynching people of color.

Justice doesn’t simply happen with the trite response of “forgive and forget.”

Justice isn’t real unless and until a price is paid — until reparations are made — until guilt is acknowledged and forgiveness is genuinely sought.

And then think of you and I — with all that is good about us — and all that is bad.

Indeed, the line between good and evil doesn't run between "us and them."

It runs **through** every human person.

There is bad in every good person, just as there is good in every bad person.

And perhaps that's where God comes in.

That when we think of God reconciling the world to himself, we're not talking about a pat on the head or a general amnesty.

We instead come face to face with God's ability to make something — out of nothing.

We come face to face with a God who "makes the ungodly person into a new creature; who makes a person righteous ... because the power of the divine Word ... frees us to become a new creation." E. Baseman, *The Righteousness of God in Paul*, 112-13, modified.

So that "salvation is not so much about setting aside guilt as it is a setting free, a release, an emancipation, from the power of sin." Id.

With the price paid for that emancipation being Christ's death on the bloody wood of the cross.

Jesus meets us on the weary roads of our lives, and then does what only God can do.

He transforms us into a new people.

Creating something out of nothing.

Transforming sinners into the righteous, the damned into the saved.

Doing this not for the few, but for all.

Thanks be to God!

+amen



