

Third Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:14a,36-41

1 Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24:13-35

Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

April 23, 2023

If you've been a parishioner at St. Thomas's for any length of time, you know that we experience a lot of turnover in our congregation. As one of our recent Parish reports notes, this has been characteristic of St. Thomas's since at least the 1950s.¹ This is due, in part, to our proximity to a number of universities, and the ebb and flow of the academic calendar. But also, Americans just move around a lot. Within a 5-year period, according to Gallup, 24% of Americans relocated within the country, compared to, for example, 9% within the European Union.² Since college, I myself have lived and worked in five different states, and, as I've gotten to know many of you, I'm definitely not an outlier in our congregation.

In a way, we share this characteristic with the people we read about in the Bible, who are no strangers to relocation, either. Abraham and Sarah migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Their descendants, the children of Jacob, went to Egypt, and then came back in the Exodus. Moses fled to Midian, Ruth and Naomi left Moab. But, in contrast to the reasons we usually move around today – for family, school, or work – these are stories of people who are forced to move because of oppression, famine, and war.

Today's Gospel reading is another one of those stories of forced relocation. While the text does not say so explicitly, the context makes clear that the journey to Emmaus was not a Sunday stroll in the park, but rather a journey borne of the fear and disillusionment that these two men had experienced over the past few days. While for us, Easter was a few weeks ago, this story takes place on Easter Sunday. It had only been a few days before that Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, and it came after a long period of rising tensions. We know this because, according to Luke, some of the disciples were already prepared for armed conflict, asking Jesus "Lord, should we strike with the sword?", though Jesus talked them down.³ While Jesus was on trial, Peter was so afraid of what would happen next that he denied Jesus three times. Then Jesus was executed by the state, and his body was placed under Roman guard. This same Sunday, as we heard last week, the Eleven remaining Disciples, except Thomas, were hiding together in a locked room, barring their doors against the outside world. They knew that there was a very real chance that any followers of Jesus remaining in Jerusalem would be targeted next.

So, understandably, Cleopas and his companion decided it was time to get out of town. They knew that the women had found the tomb empty early that morning, but they didn't believe he was alive, not yet. They speak of Jesus's ministry in the past tense, saying that Jesus *was* a

¹ St. Thomas's Rector Report, February 8, 2022 (accessible via <https://mailchi.mp/969836a1c350/st-thomass-ews-april-19-6019257?e=e2eda8d6cc>)

² "381 Million Adults Worldwide Migrate Within Countries" (accessed at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/162488/381-million-adults-worldwide-migrate-within-countries.aspx>)

³ Luke 22:49, NRSV.

prophet mighty in deed and word, and that they *had hoped* that he would be the one to redeem Israel. They speak with sadness, because, by all appearances, Jesus was dead, and the Jesus movement was over. They no longer see a future for themselves there in Jerusalem. So, they fled.

When I think about people who are choosing to flee, I think now about places like Florida. Last week, the Florida Board of Education approved an expansion of its infamous “Don’t Say Gay” law, which originally covered Kindergarten through 3rd grade. Now it covers all grade levels. In Florida, and other states, limitations are being placed on access to public spaces, and medical care. The news is upsetting, and yet sadly not unexpected – since the beginning of this anti-trans moral panic a few years ago, those familiar with this topic have been warning about the ways that this rhetoric was going to escalate, and it has. In an atmosphere of increasing fear and intimidation, more than 50% of LGBTQ parents in Florida have considered leaving the state, according to a recent survey published by UCLA. One out of six have already begun taking concrete steps to do so.⁴ Many more, of course, simply cannot leave, even if they might want to – divorced parents who share custody, or those on probation, or those with family obligations or who lack financial resources, or people whose medical care is tied to a particular job or a particular place.

As one parent responded to the survey:

“The Don’t Say Gay bill claims to be for parent rights, but my rights have been taken away since its passage. My right to send my daughter to school freely, my right to live without fear of who I am, my right to not be discriminated against based on my sexual orientation, and my daughter to not be discriminated against based on her parents’ sexual orientation.”

In a 1997 essay on the Road to Emmaus, the author and activist Michael Kelly, who lost his job as a Catholic educator in the 90s after coming out as a gay man, invites us to imagine Cleopas and his companion as queer.⁵ After all, Luke is the author who tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on the Ethiopian eunuch and the Gentile Cornelius, upon people who were excluded because of purity laws, and, more generally, upon those who are considered outsiders, or outcasts, by their communities. Kelly points out that, as Luke tells it, these two are walking away from their religious community at what is possibly the most painful moment in their lives.

What does it mean, in the midst of all that disruption and upheaval, that Jesus chooses to appear to Cleopas and his companion? Before he appears to Peter, or John, or any of the Eleven, what does it mean that he meets these two men who are running for their lives? Jesus comes to them *because* they are on the fringes, not in spite of it. Because they are on the outside of that locked room, where the rest of the disciples are gathered, not on the inside.

It is in this moment that God’s character is made known. Even when Cleopas and his companion have given up hope, when they have turned their back on institutional religion, or maybe instead

⁴ UCLA and Clark University, “Impact of HB 1557 (Florida’s Don’t Say Gay Bill) on LGBTQ+ Parents in Florida). Available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Dont-Say-Gay-Impact-Jan-2023.pdf>.

⁵ Michael Kelly, “The road from Emmaus: the challenge of the future” in *Seduced By Grace* at 26 (Clouds of Magellan Publishing, 2007).

when institutional religion has turned its back on them, Jesus not only appears to them, but walks alongside them, revealing himself in the reading of the Word, and the breaking of the bread.

Then, the nature of Cleopas's and his companion's journey is immediately changed. They are no longer going to Emmaus, but to Jerusalem, where they have a new prophetic role, which is to share, against all expectations, that Jesus's presence is revealed in their lives. And, as they find out, it's not just the two of them – Jesus's presence is revealed in Mary Magdalene, and in Peter, and in the Eleven, and in Thomas, and Jesus's presence continues to be made known in you, and in me.

God's redeeming work means that, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we no longer have to run *from* anything– from fear, or hopelessness. Instead we can now run *towards* – towards faith, freedom from our bonds, mutual love, and the good news that we are all beloved children of God.