

Luke 24:

Let's take a walk together! That was my pitch yesterday at Earth Day celebration in Meadowbrook Park. Taking a walk in nature offers healing for trauma, health for body/spirit. It offers a way to burn off anxiety and get back into rhythm of living. When the plan falls apart, or the day hits a bump, or the week hammers you like a two penny nail, it's time to hit the trail and take a walk.

Cleopas and Simon were on a hike precisely because their entire world had been shaken to the core. Cleopas and Simon entire lives had unfolded under a system run by people who clearly did not care about them except as a source of taxes and labor – the Roman Empire.

But these two had met up with Jesus of Nazareth, and he'd shown them a way of living where the poor mattered, where outcasts could be embraced, and enemies could be forgiven. They'd seen him heal people who seemed incurably sick, and feed an entire crowd of hungry people. Wow!

It had changed them. They had begun to live differently, with their heads held high and their eyes wide open to the world, part of a community that followed this Jesus of Nazareth character and found a new faith in the future with him.

But on the week we meet them - their new way of living ended in the worst, most brutal way. Boom. Over. Jesus' life. The community. The hope for a different future. Time to take a hike.

Have you ever hit the road, like Cleopas and Simon, when you felt bereft? Confused. Beat up. Defeated?

If so, you know they are managing, just barely, to put one foot in front of the other when they are joined by a stranger. At first, they can't believe the stranger is so ignorant! Don't you know what's happened? they say. We had a champion. It looked like the odds were shifting in our favor. Then with treachery and betrayal, they killed him. Bled him to death right in front of our eyes. And WE HAD HOPED . . .

We had hoped. For my fellow English majors and grammar nerds "We had hoped" is the saddest, most hopeless verb tense of all. It means in the past something happened repeatedly, reliably, predictably. But in the present . . . it no longer happens at all. The present imperfect. It's not just grammar. It is a state of being.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think it's a state that lots of people have begun to inhabit in the last few years. There are a lot of great people who have come to see the present as imperfect and irremediably broken. And a lot of the hopelessness has to do with the state of the beautiful planet we share.

I work for an environmental non-profit. I got into this work because God's Creation and God's people are so beautiful and important. And because I wanted to stop Climate Change. But guess what - I haven't succeeded. The latest scientific reports show that planet warming gasses are thicker than they've been since God brought forth life on the land and saw that it was good. It was in the 380 ppm when I started. We've been at it for 10 years. Now it is 408 ppm. Going in the wrong direction. Seas are warming and currents are changing decades before scientists expected. Surveys of wildlife show that populations of wildlife have declined by 70% in the last 50 years. 70% of wild animals are already gone. And I love people even more than polar bears, so it is even worse that if we stay the course we are on, in another fifty years, by 2070, there will be billions of human babies and mamas and sisters and grandparents will have to move because the places they've called "home" for generations will experience heat so severe their bodies cannot survive there.

People of faith, caring for Earth "HAD HOPED" that when people understood the magnitude of the problem, they'd pivot and make changes. We had hoped that before forest fire season became a yearly event in the West, things would be getting better. We had hoped. But it's the imperfect present in which we live. And hope is in short supply.

That's why we need to the story of the road to Emmaus, of the stranger who told Cleopas and Simon, "You foolish chumps! How slow you are to catch on to what God is always up to! God was the God of Moses, who led slaves out of Egypt, after Pharoah said "NO!" ten different ways to Sunday. God is the God of the prophets, who shouted crazy messages about swords being turned into garden utensils and a valley full of scattered skeletons, who get put back together and stand up on their feet.

The stranger kept talking until they got where they were going. And then the stranger broke bread with them and finally, finally finally they saw that the stranger was Jesus and the hope that had died with him on the cross was rekindled like a fire, burning in their hearts.

God doesn't quit on us. For God, there is no such time as "too late".

Let me tell you a true story. It is the story of two scientists, who met and married as struggling grad students. They were biologists, who studied marine sponges at the University of San Diego.

They got their degrees and they got jobs. In Butte, Montana. They moved there but it was hard to feel at home. Not only was it far from the ocean, with cold winds instead of warm breezes most of the year, it was different in other ways, too. Butte was an old mining town. Whereas in San Diego they'd been surrounded by people who loved the natural world, in Butte the vibe was completely different. It seemed like here the attitude was that Earth was there to be exploited, that what was valuable was what could be dug up, scraped out, blasted into and hauled away.

There was a lot about Butte that really horrified our young couple – especially the Berkley Pit. The pit was what remained after a copper mine carved into the side of a mountain had been

exhausted and closed. Rather than clean up their mess, the mine's owners decided the easiest way to avoid liability if someone fell down a mineshaft or something – was to just blow the top off the mountain. Soon ground water and rain and snowmelt created a 40 billion gallon lake – one of the largest in N. America.

But it wasn't a real lake. The acidity of the pyrite rock and the water and the sun combined to pull heavy metals of the soil and into the water of this environmental nightmare. When Alissa and Richard first saw it, it took their breath away. The liquid is not blue, like water. It is red. And grey and green and very very toxic. It is full of arsenic and cadmium and lead and poison of every kind. Everything it touches, dies.

In a winter storm one year, a huge flock of Snow Geese – 342 of them, sought shelter from the winds by landing in the Berkley Pit. And by morning, all of them were dead. In the dark, they had sipped the "water" and it had eaten them from the inside out. Bleak. Tragic. Horrible.

And, just as a footnote, our scientist couple went to a conference, and a custodian unplugged the refrigerator in their lab by mistake and killed all the sponge samples they'd been working with. They'd have to start their research over from scratch. And sponges didn't make any sense as a project anymore.

They were lost. Like Cleopas and Simon after the crucifixion. They couldn't see a way forward.

Then a colleague brought them a slime covered stick that he'd found floating in the Berkeley Pit. What is this stuff? The biologist put it under the microscope and found out that, strangely enough it was "bio". It was alive. And they wondered about what could live in that toxic brew.

They started looking, and they found other life forms living there, and they id'ed them. Then, one day at the Pit, they harvested something that looked really different. It was black, and stick and not only was it alive, it had some very unusual properties: It seemed to eat heavy metals in its environment. It had the ability to bind the metal, to take it out of solution and leave the water in which it had been suspended cleaner. Less toxic. And not just a little less toxic – the scientists had already seen microbes who could do that – bind 2% or 4% of the metal molecules. This one was voracious! 87%, 94%, 97% of the toxins were being gobbled up and neutralized.

What was it? Where did it come from? It was like nothing they'd seen before. They grew cultures and performed more tests, and finally started sending out samples to other labs. Have you seen this? What can this be? Will you compare it to specimens you have?

Nothing. Nothing. Month and months of no progress. Then. A wildlife biology lab made a match. They said, This microbe is rare. But we have seen it before. The only place we know that it can be found is in the digestive tracts of snow geese.

The dying geese in Berkley pit had not been the end of the story, as sad and final as they were. Life – crazy resilient undeniable LIFE made another story possible. A story of new possibilities and renewed hope and purpose, very much like the story of the road to Emmaus, which turned Cleopas and Simon around.

This year when I read that story, I noticed something I hadn't before - - - that those two disciples decided to return, immediately, to Jerusalem. It was dark. Why didn't they wait til morning? Their hearts were burning, they had good news to share. That doesn't mean the road forward become suddenly clear and easy. But with hope and faith and partners to walk with us, it becomes possible.

That is also true of the path that we must take as people of faith, into a sustainable, healthy future with our Earth and our Climate. We know the destination – a healthy place where all God's creatures can enjoy clean water and air, livable temperatures and healthy food our bodies need. And we know how to take steps in the right direction.

The Environmental Stewardship Committee of this congregation has been actively moving us in the right direction for over twenty years – reducing waste and energy consumption, creating habitat for pollinators and birds right in the heart of the city. They've made this neighbor cleaner and more beautiful. They recycle Styrofoam with your help. And three of them went to Springfield last week to support a bill reducing the amount of that pesky Styrofoam in our lives and other important legislation. You should be so proud of them!

Do they have – does anyone have – a perfectly clear map guaranteed to get us to where we need to be fast enough to stop climate change and stave off ecological disaster? It's a road humanity hasn't traveled before.

But people of faith – Easter and Emmaus people – we do not walk it alone. We may not always see clearly what God's next great thing is going to be. But we can be sure that Jesus will walk with us, and in faithful company we can keep moving forward in Hope. In Love. In faithfulness to the One who brought our Savior Out of the Grave and who continues to bring Life out of Death, Love out of Pain.

Let's take a walk! Happy Earth Day, Easter People!