



What a Long, Strange, Trip It Has Been

By Rev. Steve Silver
First Congregational Church of Lebanon
Luke XXIV: 13-35

Have you ever found yourself doing something repeatedly, over and over again? You believe it is important but you don't know if it is making a difference. I would like to tell you about one such endeavor. It is the quote at the beginning of the bulletin. I know that this tradition predated my arrival at this church but it is a tradition that I am familiar with from my previous church work. Every week I try to find a quote that will speak to the sermon, or the scripture passages we are reading, or to the liturgical season.

In all my years in Concord nobody ever said anything to me about the quotes in the bulletin. And for most of my time here nobody ever said anything to me about the quotes in the bulletin. I was tempted to starting to run the same one, week in and week out. But then, one Sunday, a couple of people commented and then another Sunday somebody else said something, so I know there are people here who are reading the quote at the beginning of the bulletin.

And maybe you are using it to center yourself before worship. Maybe you are taking it home and meditating on it later in the week. This week maybe you'll go home and wonder just what is going on with your minister. Because not only is the quote taken from an unusual source for church life so is the title of the sermon scripture. And I know some of you are aware of the source for these things. The Grateful Dead! Now, I have a confession to make. I am not some huge fan of the Grateful Dead. But the title of that sermon, "What a long strange trip it's been", has resonated with me for many, many years and for a variety of different reasons.

That thought first came into my life long ago when I was working for Tufts University and one of my colleagues who was a senior person in our division, who had brought in new ideas and new ways of doing things, didn't quite jell with the person in charge of the entire division. And so he was let go and it was one of those classic, don't go back to your office, you can go to the HR situations.

I got in touch with this person after he had left to let him know how sorry I was that he had gone and how much I had enjoyed working with him. And he told me that he appreciated those words of support and then commented on what a long, strange trip it had been. And for all of us who worked there at that time that was a fair description of our professional lives.

But that phrase jumped into my mind as I read this passage from Luke. Think about these two travelers on the road; what a long, strange trip they had been on. These are part of the core Clarips? and this unnamed person are just part of the crowd. People who had heard Jesus teach or preach or maybe they had seen him perform a healing miracle. Clearly

though he had a hold on them. And now he was gone. They are going from Jerusalem to Emmaus in the wake of the crucifixion. They are not sure what comes next.

Their experience is, as followers of Jesus would have set them at odds with their community, with their family, with their friends. That in and of itself must have been jarring. But now this stranger comes up to them and starts talking.

Now I don't know about you but when I'm going somewhere if someone I don't know and comes up with me and starts chatting away, my defenses go up. I have somewhere I have to be. I don't know this person. They might be a little weird. It is just a natural reaction. But they listened. They let him talk. They talked to him.

They were surprised when it seemed that he didn't know what had happened in Jerusalem, Clearly everybody knew about the big events involving Jesus and the trial and the execution. They confessed their disappointment, their frustration, and their sense of loss.

For them the story was over and they didn't know what to do next. So the stranger decides to set them straight. He explains to them what the story is really all about. And then we see them sharing the meal, a aphoristic meal, xxx describe it ,xxxxx and Jesus reveals himself to Cleopas and this unnamed person. They reflected on their experience and they saw how he had been present with them. And they went off to share the news.

Now this is the kind of passage that preachers love because there is so much in here. So much to preach on. I can talk about dealing with disappointment and I can talk about spiritual journeys. We don't know who this person is who was with Cleopas. There is speculation that Cleopas is the same person as Pulpis in John and therefore the unnamed person is his wife Mary. So I could talk about couples and relationships. Heck, like any good preacher I could take this small little kernel and spin out a Mother's Day sermon about this person who might be Mrs. Cleopas.

But there is a detail there that confronted me and demanded my attention. And that is that we don't know the identity of this person. And that opens a door because we can see ourselves as that unnamed person. We can see ourselves traveling down this road, grappling with our questions, our disappointment, our faith.

Now that's all easily said and done. It is easy for me up here, take this passage, take it home and meditate on your and reflect on your faith journey. Reflect on your life as a member of the body of Christ. That would be easy but it really wouldn't be fair.

So I am going to show you how to do this. At least I am going to try. I am going to tell you my story. I am going to tell you about how I got here. Where I've been. Who knows, maybe where I am going. Now as I thought about this I had to ask myself the question where do I start with this story? Do I start with my first conversation with the pulpit committee or maybe my decision to go to Divinity School? The more I thought about it and prayed on it the more I realized I needed to start at the very beginning. Fear not this will not be a 12-hour autobiographical sermon.

I was born in 1964 in Westchester County NY. My parents are Christian; perfectly normal people. But like other couples throughout history, their marriage was not working out. By the time I was three they decided it was time for a divorce. And my parents decided at that time that the most important thing to them was that I be raised in a home with two loving parents, so they decided to put me up for adoption. And more important to them than anything else was the sense that the two people who would raise me would love each other.

So, interesting twist here. The people who adopted me happened to be Jewish. Religion was not the determining factor for my birth parents ...it was a loving household. So off I went to northern New Jersey, where I grew up in a perfectly normal, average, middle class home. My dad travelled on business and my mother was involved in the community and we did all the things you would expect people to do in suburbia. We were involved in our local faith community, the Jewish Center. Went to the High Holiday services, some services else time during the year.

And then in 1973 my father had his first heart attack. And he had to liquidate his business...something he built up over the course of decades. He loved that business. He traveled all over the world. And then things changed at home because we had to deal with changed financial circumstances. My mother went out to work while my dad recovered. And he started a new career and it was something he enjoyed doing.

But in 1977 he had another attack and this one was fatal. Thirteen years old. I was angry. I wanted answers. I wanted someone to be responsible. Talk to me about cardiovascular disease or the stress of running a business - that wasn't going to do the trick. But I knew who I could pin the blame on. God. God could have stopped this from happening. Right?

And so began a long estrangement from what we call organized religion. It didn't help that the faith community in which we were members for so long really didn't rally to support my mother during this time after all she and my father had done. My mother knowing that I was at that point in life that I wanted to know more about who I was and where I was from shared with me information about my background.

But I can't say that the Christian church had much appeal for me at that time because my older sister was going to church - the fundamentalist variety - and if that's what Christianity was all about, I wanted nothing to do with it. So the years unfolded. Sunday morning was a time when I would read the Times enjoy a cup of coffee, go out and relax.

And then in 1989 I went to business school and I starting dating one of my classmates and she went to church every Sunday. So good egg that I was and wanting the relationship to work out I decided to go to church too, particularly because services at First Presbyterian church started at 11 o'clock. Well the person I was dating is not Rachel so as you can guess that relationship did not work out. But something funny happened. I continued to go to church on Sunday morning. At first I couldn't quite tell you what it was that drawing me back but I know that I enjoyed the music and the minister there - Dan Little a tremendous preacher.

And then one Sunday, sitting in a pew by myself after the service was over, I had an intense and intimate experience of Jesus. I felt his presence there. It was unlike anything I had ever known before. I'd wondered about God all those years. Being angry with him. Ignored him. Thought he'd gone away. I thought maybe I had gone away. Then I realized, particularly reflecting on this moment over these years, that God had always been present. But I wasn't ready to recognize him. I wasn't open to seeing him.

Think about this story we heard this morning about these people traveling on the road. They are lost in their pain, and their grief, and their frustration. They know how they want to see things, they know how they should understand them and in doing so they lost the ability to see what they wanted to find.

It is like the guy at the top of the hill wanting to see the sunrise making resolutely xxx xxxx themselves facing west. But after the sun rises high enough even if you are facing the wrong direction you begin to see something is going on. And if you are open and ready and willing you can turn around to see that surprise. And that's what happened with those disciples that day and I am blessed to believe that's what happened to me.

The journey did not come to an end that morning but continued. I was baptized later that summer, never sure whether I had been baptized as a child, and I considered what all of this meant. As long ago as 1991 I began to think about going to seminary. I actually visited some. Then promptly decided there were other things to do with my time.

So I returned to Boston, continued my career in development, became involved in Old South Church in Copley Square, loved being involved, did just about everything a lay person could do, never quite lost this idea of maybe going to divinity school. I applied, I got in, and I didn't go. There were things holding me back, things I thought I should do, things I wanted to do.

I liked living on Deacon Hill. I liked earning money. I thought maybe being involved in the church would be enough for me, but then I thought no I want to go deeper with this. So I picked up a Masters at Harvard in Divinity and I thought studying these things would be enough, but it wasn't.

And then I reached one of those fish or cut bait moments in 2003. I was getting phone calls from recruiters talking to me about chief development officer jobs. If I landed one of those positions I was going to be set professionally for the rest of my life, doing really interesting work, and make good money, have fascinating colleagues. But I also knew that if I took that next step I would be locking myself into death??

So Rachel and I talked about this and we prayed about it and decided to roll the dice. So I didn't take any of those jobs and I went to Divinity school, which was a wonderful experience for me. But even then I could feel myself resisting, worked for the ordained ministry. I worked for the Episcopal diocese of Massachusetts. I was able to consider doing judicatory work. Basically it would be lay ministry. I got to visit churches, I got to preach, and I made much better money.

But I loved preaching, and I loved visiting those congregations, and I loved the work I had done when I was a field ed. student, and I loved being able to provide pastoral care to people, and being blessed and privileged to enter into their lives particularly during their moments of weakness and vulnerability.

So, I finishedWorked as a affiliated minister in Concord.

I started reading the UCC ads and as many of you have heard before, I am not supposed to be here. We had at agreement at home. We liked where we were in Groton. I was not going to look at any congregation more than 60 minutes away from our house, because we weren't moving. Get that God? We are going to do this on my terms.

So don't tell me, don't try to explain why that day I looked at the listing for this church in Lebanon. I knew it was beyond my travel distance. I had driven through here a couple of times. I was familiar with the Dairy Twirl, but I am not going to claim that that was a good enough reason to move here. But when I met with the Pulpit committee, I sensed the Holy Spirit.... Get up and go!

And I have continued to sense that since I have come here to be your pastor. It has been a very full 15 months or so. And I continue to learn from you and I believe I continue to grow deeper in my faith. Believe it or not, I used to be even more hard-edged than I am now. What a long, strange trip it has been. It has been strange in the modern sense of the word: a little weird, but mostly it has been strange in the old sense of the word: fantastic, exceptional, different, magical, xxxxx.

The invitation I would like to extend to each of you today is to reflect on you own long, strange trips, to think about where you have been, where you are, and where you might be going. All of you have great stories to tell and I choose that word carefully, because reflecting on it isn't enough. Christianity is not a solo activity; it is a team sport. We do it in community; we do it with others.

So I invite you, reflect on your story, and share it with somebody else, maybe your spouse, our your significant other, a friend, maybe someone in this church you want to get to know better. The way people come in to the family of Christ isn't through learned expositions on theology, it is not through church growth seminars, it is through people seeing how life in the community of faith changes and transforms and betters the lives of others. And the way people see that is when they hear about it, they hear your enthusiasm, in your joy, in your frustrations.

So I invite you and encourage you to do this. And I do that offering this the word of assurance that whether you are running or shuffling, striding confidently, or stumbling, jogging or tiptoeing down the road, you are not alone. God is with you. God Emmanuelle is with you, with all of us. Join me in prayer.