

# A New Road

## March 23, 2008

### Easter Sunday

Have you ever been walking down a road or driving along, with your mind just thinking about all kinds of things, and then suddenly, a light seems to go off, and something that hadn't made sense before seems to at that moment? Or, we've experienced some new insight or understanding that we'd never fully grasped before? If so, then maybe we're on the same page as we begin exploring a way to experience this day we call Easter.

I'm assuming that we're all here looking for some word, some sign, some indication that the story some of us have heard over and over again will resonate in a new way within us. We want the story, in whatever form we happen to think of it, to be real for us. However, I would be less than honest if I told you that this is an easy thing to come by. In fact, the more I try to share the significance of the Easter story, the more difficult it seems to become.

You see, I find Easter to be an experience that cannot be defined or described. As I read and re-read all the Bible stories telling of the early experiences of those closest to Jesus, I find myself more and more confused. No two stories agree on any of the details around that first Easter morning. There is discrepancy about who first went to the tomb; there's no commonality as to the where, when and how the disciples experienced Jesus after his death. To be quite honest, the more I read and study, the more questions I have.

And yet, where I come down now, and where I have continued to come down in recent years, is that, even though we cannot know the factual details and the specifics of that which we call Easter, it's pretty certain that something significant and life-changing occurred then, and I'm convinced continues to occur now.

Why do I say that? For me, it revolves around the life of the followers of Jesus. It seems that after his arrest, sentencing and death, the inner circle disappeared from view. My guess is that they were scared to death, and were trying to figure out how they had been so taken in, and what they should do to escape any physical harm. They were cowering away, hiding from the officials and townspeople, trying to stay under cover until they could sneak away and resume their former lives. I suspect most of them would taken advantage of any witness protection program that might have been available to them.

But somehow, that all changed; something significant impacted their lives in such a way that everything about them changed. John Shelby Spong, in his book *Jesus for the Non Religious*, states it this way: "There are powerful data, which scream that something of great significance happened after the crucifixion of Jesus that had the capacity to transform the disciples from fleeing cowards into unflinching persons of enormous strength..."

That's the kind of story encapsulated in our Bible passage for this morning. We have two of the friends of Jesus making their way from Jerusalem toward a little village called Emmaus. Along with way, a stranger, someone we're told that they did not know or recognize, joins them and walks with them all the way to the village. In the course of their journey, they share what they have experienced, expressing their sadness and disappointment at the turn of events, and the stranger shares some his wisdom on the events.

Even so, it is not until they invite the stranger to share an ordinary meal with them that they get it! They realize that what they knew in Jesus and what they experienced with him had a timeless quality to it. It wasn't so much that they saw Jesus literally in the breaking of bread at mealtime, but that they understood in a whole new way who Jesus was and what the significance of his life was. It was an "Aha!" moment, filled with fresh insights and new understandings—so fresh and so new that we're told that the two turned around and retraced their steps to Jerusalem to share their experience with the others. They walked down the road they had just taken, but now it was as though they were walking down an entirely new road, because they were now Easter people.

That, to me, is the heart of the Easter story. Something happened; we cannot know what exactly or how, but something of incredible mystery and power happened that transformed their lives. It was powerful enough to move all the disciples beyond their previously perceived limits, beyond the fear that plagued them before; they moved beyond their once held views of who they were and what faith was all about; they moved beyond what they once believed about their own mortality. They became entirely new beings.

What I believe is that their eyes were finally open enough for them to say that they had seen and experienced Jesus. Spong, in the book I mentioned earlier says, "To see him 'raised,' however, does not necessarily mean to feel his flesh; it means to embrace his meaning" In other words, the disciples were able to see the purpose of Jesus' life in a new way; the gift of fresh perspectives and insight had become theirs. It was as though some incredible truth had been revealed to them, offering a phenomenal breakthrough in their understanding of themselves, of their lives, of Jesus and God, They truly embraced the meaning of his life, and allowed it to transform their lives.

That's the heart of Easter: The power of God's love that's available to break into our lives today as it was for those disciples centuries ago. Our hearts and minds and spirits can also be changed and transformed. The opportunity to become new people is right at our fingertips. Because of God's Easter love, we can move beyond our limits, and live the life God has in store for us.

Let's think about what it might mean to live that kind of life. I really think it has to do with living more as Jesus did, living fully the life God wants us to live. For instance, what might it be like to move for us to overcome the fears that so often hold us back from life?

Take the fear of failure. We often allow our hearts pounding in our chests to cause us to play it safe, never venturing into new territory or uncharted water. We allow the fear of looking foolish or getting hurt to cause us to cower in the corner, hiding and hoping no one will see us. We become like clingy children, hanging on Mom's or Dad's leg, afraid to let go, afraid to move forward, afraid to trust enough to take that first step.

That's not an Easter life. The truth is that a life boxed in by fear is not really life at all, and certainly not the kind of life Jesus modeled. He took risks by challenging the established customs of the day, by questioning the religious authorities. He didn't seem to be afraid of public opinion and he wasn't afraid of falling on his face. In fact, Jesus was rejected about as many times as he was received, but he was so grounded that he had the courage to keep trying, to step out again.

That's the kind of life we're called to live because of Easter—a life on the edge, a life of courage, a life where we step out in faith. It means we're willing to trust God enough to take a step, and even if it turns out to be the wrong step, to know that we'll be OK, because of God's presence. It means we'll find within us the courage to be ourselves, and give up trying to be someone else, or trying to live up to our parents' or our partner's or our teacher's expectations. We'll have the strength to be who God created us to be, with all our abilities and talents, as well as our shortcomings and failures.

If our lives are really transformed by Easter, what other limits might we move beyond? If we look at the life of Jesus, we can see that he moved beyond the barriers that had been set up by the social circumstances of his day. We have story after story of his paying attention to those others ignored, of visiting in the homes of the undesirables of the time, or of socializing with those considered less than acceptable. He didn't honor the prejudices and biases that others held so dear. He broke down those barriers, and he saw people for who they were. He honored the good in them, and brought out the best.

If you and I are going to live Easter lives, we can do no less. Maybe it begins with realizing that there is a God-spark within every single person we meet, even though that spark is sometimes difficult to see, but knowing that when we look hard enough and long enough, we'll find it. When we do, God's love takes over, and we feel and show compassion and care for those others are prone to avoid and ignore. When we look into the eyes of another human being and see the eyes of God, we find it within ourselves to help them be their very best self. Our old biases and prejudices have a way of fading away when we look into the God-eyes of another person.

There's something else, too, that happens when Easter becomes real in our lives: We gain a new understanding of ourselves and our purpose in being. Without an Easter experience, some of us spend a lot of time floundering around trying to find out who we are and what we're about. Easter tells us that it's about just

being ourselves, and being willing to embark down this new road of self-discovery.

When we know in our hearts that we are loved and accepted by God, we literally become new beings. Knowing that we are loved makes it possible for us to begin to love ourselves, and that means we'll become more forgiving and more accepting of ourselves and others. If there is any lesson in the life and death of Jesus, it is that he dared to be himself, and we are called, not to be Jesus, but to be ourselves. When we begin to live that journey, to walk that new road—that's living like Easter people.

There's yet one another transforming experience that can take place when Easter becomes real in our lives—death loses its power over us. Instead of fearing it, we begin to know in our hearts that, although we can't know the shape and form of life after death, God offers us the assurance in Easter that there is more. As I often say at funerals, our faith assures us that physical death is not the end. Instead, it marks a transition into new life—eternal life.

We can't, of course, document what happens after physical death, but I do believe that the life and death of Jesus assure us that death is not the final answer. Easter tells us that God can be trusted, that God will never let us down, that God is with us and for us, now and forever.

I have to agree with something Jack Spang wrote in one of his early books. He stated a deeply-held conviction about the power of the Christian movement that is defined by Easter with these words: **“At the very heart of that movement was an unshakable conviction and an unwavering confidence that life, not death, was the final destiny for the human being and that this destiny had been experienced in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Something happened in the Moment of Easter that created enormous changes and ignited enormous power.”**

I believed that when I first read it, and I believe it now. How about you?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we are ready to walk down a new road, to embark on a fresh journey of being ourselves, of trusting God, of being more like Easter people.

Have a good Easter, and go in peace. Amen.