“THE EMMAUS ROAD”
Luke 24:13-35
May 8, 2011
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

In Hinduism, the path of a person’s life beyond young childhood is divided into four stages, each with its own responsibilities, rewards, and spiritual goals. The four stages can roughly be translated as Student, Householder, Retiree, and Ascetic. The student’s life (beginning at about age 10) is about learning: creating a foundation of both academic and spiritual learning that will allow one to move into adult life. As a householder, one is primarily responsible for focusing on career and family, a time when spiritual questions are often subordinated to the immediate demands of making a living, raising children, with all the attendant multi-tasking and dashing around. The retiree, in Hindu spiritual terms, is one who has fulfilled those personal responsibilities and now is guided to invest his or her time and energy in the larger community: volunteering, giving time, money, commitment to changing for the better the world to be passed on to the next generation. And in old age, as ascetics, persons are to be about the work of disconnecting from this world, divesting themselves not only of possessions, but of attachment to the things of this life and focusing as much as possible on pure spirit, preparing themselves for the life that comes beyond death, even to the extent of becoming isolates, owning nothing but a begging bowl, spending their hours in meditation and prayer.

While, I admit, the independent streak in me chafes at the regimentation of this model of spiritual growth, I have always appreciated its underlying understanding that as we move through life, we live our faith in the mist of that real life, with sometimes more, sometimes less energy and attention focused on our spiritual development. Christianity has no such roadmap of expectation. I remember in my first church, after preaching what I thought at the time was an excellent sermon on discipleship, full of “shoulds” and “oughts” and strenuous demands, a woman in my congregation, a mother of four children under the age of seven—including three-year-old twins—came to see me, troubled. “Maybe I don’t belong in the church,” she confessed to me, “because honestly, while I love the church and do the best I can, the pressing questions of my life are about how to get Will to soccer practice and Linnie to her violin lesson, keep the twins from killing themselves or each other, and still get dinner on the table and keep everybody in clean laundry. I consider it a triumph of spirituality if we make it to church on time on Sunday!” Her comment but, more importantly, her real distress that she was not committed enough or good enough to be a serious Christian, has stayed with me for thirty years.

In some ways, the Bible is not our friend when it comes to helping us figure out a roadmap of faith development. A good friend of mine put it well in an e-mail to me earlier this week when she noted that the biblical record, when discussing or demonstrating faith, is long on conventional heroes—Abraham, Moses, Jesus, “give up everything and come and follow me”—and short on devoted parents, and administrative assistants, and people who make a positive

change in your life because they know about fixing plumbing. What is the Good News of the gospel to busy, overcommitted, stretched-to-the-limit ordinary people trying to live life with care and integrity? What is the bottom-line expectation of our journey in faith?

And the best Biblical answer I have to that is the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road. The first thing I like about these disciples is that they were not part of the inner twelve, the ones who dropped their nets and followed Jesus without a backwards glance. These were people who cared, but not part of the elite. They, at least one of them, had seen the empty tomb, and they had heard stories about those who had seen the risen Christ; but they themselves had not seen him, and they were walking down the road trying to figure it all out as they presumably went about some "ordinary" business that was taking them not to the big city or the center of the action, but to a small village called Emmaus seven miles away. In today's language, they were multi-tasking, trying to figure out the meaning of the resurrection on their way from home to work, or school to baseball practice. And they weren't getting very far in their understanding. Don't you find yourself liking these guys?

They were joined on the road by a stranger—who turned out to be the Risen Christ, but they didn't have a clue about that—and they engaged in conversation. They told the stranger about the events in Jerusalem and that they were confused and unhappy about what had happened; the stranger, as they walked along, bit by bit, opened up the scripture to them, helped them to understand what had happened in a different context. And then they got to Emmaus, and the two disciples invited the stranger, "come and eat with us, stay with us because it is almost evening." In a world where table fellowship was a serious commitment, it was a significant act of hospitality. And the stranger broke the bread, and they recognized the Risen Christ in him, and were so overwhelmed by that that they braved the nighttime highway to travel the seven miles back to Jerusalem and tell the others what had happened.

So what has this story to do with our faith journey? First of all, remember that Luke wrote this story about fifty years after Jesus died. Luke, as far as we know, never met Jesus, never saw the Risen Christ, and was writing to others in the same position. And Luke, as a writer, has an uncanny knack with stories that also work as metaphor.

So what if the Emmaus Road story isn't really about a two and a half hour walk, but a journey that extends for a lifetime for all of us who would be disciples. We begin curious, drawn to faith, drawn to this story of the resurrected Christ and God's great love for us, but it is not all-consuming. It takes its place, we think about it, muse about it at odd moments when we are going about the routine of our lives. And then, maybe, we are brave enough to articulate what we are thinking and feeling to others of our community; brave enough to share both what we think we understand and where we are lost or confused. People come our way—pastors hopefully (we like to think we are helpful), other teachers, those of more mature faith. They help us to put more pieces together. We practice what we have learned, extending our hospitality wider than we

would before, inviting even a stranger into our midst. And every now and again, something happens. An ordinary moment turns extraordinary, what Marcus Borg would call a "thin moment," where the line between the things of heaven and the things of earth become transparent, and we know for that instant the real presence of God.

I had one of those moments this Easter season in the Palm Sunday "In the Beginning" afternoon worship service. We had a Palm Sunday parade led by 3 year-old Marianne Som in a head scarf and Mexican vest that hung to her knees as Jesus, along with a motley group of disciples following her who ranged in age from 8 months to 58 years. And the crowd was singing, and dancing, waving and throwing palms. And what began as a pageant became suddenly real—real joy, real excitement, a sense of presence so real you could almost taste the grit of the Palm Sunday Road. We all have these moments. Some more than others and some of us more ready to name it than others. But holiness and real life intertwine, and something in our faith center of gravity shifts, and we are different than we were before. And then we, like the disciples in Emmaus, can hardly wait to rise from the table and tell anyone who will listen what happened.

What do you think happened to the disciples after Emmaus? See, I think the whole cycle started over again. Thinking about faith and life as they moved from here to there, building the trust to speak of their perceptions, taking the opportunities they had to learn, deliberately practicing answering God's loving hospitality to them with their own deep hospitality to others, and on another day, as unexpected as the last—a moment, an hour, even a whole day where earth and heaven merged, and they knew with every breath they took, they breathed with God. Over and over again through their life, they repeated it. Over and over in our lives, we repeat it. We use what we have learned to deepen our discipleship every time we make a choice to put our money here and not there, to be careful of the earth, to actually call instead of think of calling a friend in need, or actually work instead of thinking of working on an issue of justice or inclusion. Slowly we get kinder, slowly we love justice more, slowly we realize that we live more and more of our life in the light of the Risen Christ, even as we drive carpools, and worry about work or sick children or aging spouses, and how we're going to pay the bills.

We are, most of us, never going to be a hero like Abraham who changed his life on a moment's notice, or Moses who saw a burning bush, or Jesus in whom earth and heaven met all the time. We may never even make the elite disciple corps. But the disciples on the Emmaus road, they also were truly the people of God, truly disciples, and so are we. Not flashy. Not superstars. We are, most of us, the administrative assistants, the devoted parents, the plumbers of the faith movement. We are the ordinary people of the church: learning, growing, becoming, as we walk the road from here to there. Ordinary disciples. An extraordinary thing. Thanks be to God. Amen.