

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Luke 24:13-35

**SERMON TITLE:** “Walking Away from Easter”

I wonder: How many of us have experienced what it’s like to walk away from Easter--to be disillusioned by our faith--to have all our hopes and dreams and expectations shattered upon the hard realities of life--to have the Christ we’ve known become as stranger to us? How many of us--at one time or another--have been struck blind with grief and hopelessness and found ourselves unable to discern God’s power and presence at work in our midst? How many of us wrestled with the question: Is the Easter event really life-transforming good news or merely an idle rumor?

Well, I’ve struggled with these questions myself and I know that others have as well. In fact, I came across the story of a young woman who knows exactly what it’s like to walk away from Easter: *For years I was very religious person, she writes. I was a Christian....I studied the scriptures. I learned the traditions. I was active in church. I counted myself in all possible ways a highly devoted Christian.*

*And of course, I believed in God. And not just your typical know-of, shrug-the-shoulders, half-hearted, whatever, sort of belief. I mean, I BELIEVED....*

*But now I’m going to tell you that faith sucks. It sucks hard...I had a solid and concrete set of beliefs and ideals that were suddenly ripped away from me by a few words from a crummy doctor. You see, I’m 20 years old and I have cancer.*

*So where is God in this? How come I devote several years of my life with the most virtuous of intentions, and the only thanks I get or ever see, is a giant tumor on the side of my neck? Where is the religion in that? What is there to hold on to in this world? If God can desert you in the most trying times, then what do you put your faith in? (quoted in “Loss of Faith” by Ami Weghorst and Molly Buck, Trincoll Journal, 1995.)*

This is what it’s like to walk away from Easter. This woman’s story, reminds me of those two disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday. They too were walking away from Easter. What was it that Cleopas said to the stranger? *We had hoped that he was the*

*one to redeem Israel.*

“We had hoped.” Notice the past tense. Just like the young woman, these disciples had once hoped--but not anymore. They were disillusioned and their faith hung in the balance.

Now obviously, these two disciples knew the scriptures well enough to understand that the Messiah would be *the one to redeem Israel*; and they had spent enough time with Jesus to discern that he was indeed *a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people*; and they knew enough about Jesus to have placed their hope in him.

But when the crisis came, their eyes were closed and their hearts were slow. They couldn't see how the suffering and death of Jesus could be anything other than a disastrous end. They weren't looking for resurrection. And they certainly couldn't see how any of this could involve redemption and hope. Consequently, their faith was failing them--a situation brought one, not by the words of some crummy doctor, but by the reality of their Lord, crucified, dead and buried.

But then came the stranger. He walked with them. He talked with them. He interpreted the scriptures so that their hearts burned within them. But still they didn't recognize him. It's only when he sat at the table with them--when he took the bread and blessed it and broke it--that their eyes were opened and they recognized the stranger as the risen Christ.

And in that moment, things began to change. The disciples turned around and raced back to Jerusalem to declare the good news of how the Lord had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. It didn't matter that the Lord had vanished from their sight. They had seen him. They knew that he was alive. And that's what counted!

If only our young woman with cancer had been able to seek the risen Christ in and through her suffering. The signs of his presence were surely all around her--in worship, in communion, in other people. So I can't help but wonder: What would have happened to this young woman if she had only kept looking for Christ in the midst of her suffering? Could she have found redemption and hope even through the crisis?

This was the case for Martin Jenco. He was a Catholic priest and one of the godliest men

I have ever met. I got to know him in 1989 when he was the featured speaker at a conference on terrorism that was sponsored by the church I served in Corpus Christi.

Back in 1984, Fr. Jenco traveled to Beirut, Lebanon to minister to the poorest of the poor. On January 8, 1985, he was kidnapped by the Islamic Jihad and held hostage for 564 days. During that time, Fr. Jenco endured imprisonment, beatings, illnesses and heartbreaking periods of sorrow and loneliness.

Let me give you an idea of the hardships he endured: When they transported him from one place to another, they taped him up like a mummy from his ankles to the top of his head, they then laced him with explosives, and threw him into the spare-tire well of a truck. The only way he could breathe was through his nose because his mouth was stuffed with a cloth and taped shut. In this and so many other ways, his existence as a hostage was a living hell.

So where was God in all of this? Right by his side--and he knew it! Father Jenco kept his eyes open--he sought out signs of the presence of Christ--and he found them. During a period when he was confined in a two-foot by six-foot closet, he managed to snatch a piece of bread. He clutched it in his hand in the darkness of that closet and said to himself over and over again, "This is the body of Christ. This is the body of Christ." In fact, all through his captivity, Fr. Jenco would save a piece of bread from the morning meal and use it as reminder of Christ's presence with him. He referred to this bread as "Jesus being nearby."

Now if Fr. Jenco in his extreme circumstances, could find signs of Christ's presence to sustain him through his captivity, then maybe--just maybe--there's hope for you and for me. I pray God that when life's crises do come upon us, we'll keep our eyes open, especially if we find ourselves walking away from Easter. And who knows? The stranger may draw near to us and transform our lives even in the face of suffering and death. Thanks be to God. Amen.