

Who Walks With You?

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St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

Readings: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19, Acts 2:14a, 36-41, 1 Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35

Who has had the most influence on your life? For most people it is a parent – either mum or dad, or a grandparent, an adoptive parent or caregiver. You know it when you do something and think – “oh no, I sound just like mum” or dad or whoever. Whether we like it or not the people that we are around regularly have a profound influence on us and, it should never be forgotten, so too we influence the lives of others. When you spend a lot of time with someone you get to know pretty much how they think and it influences you subconsciously – for better or worse.

The opening words of Psalm 116 are amongst the most beautiful in Scripture: ***“I love Yahweh, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live.”*** They come from the life experience of David as he ran from King Saul. His situation was desperate and his life was, time and again, at risk as the increasingly mad king pursued David through the valleys and the hills wanting to terminate his life. The psalm is intensely personal. In the Hebrew *“I love Yahweh”*, the tetragrammaton, the name for the unspeakable name of God, is a sign of David's personal and intensely close relationship with God. David goes on to tell us why he loves God. The Lord has heard his voice. In fact, the Hebrew is slightly more subtle – God is the hearer, the One who hears – all things and specific things, God hears me. In a world where there is so much noise about us who hears? Who has time to listen to me? In his book *Swift to Hear*, Jonathan Swift makes the point that lots of people speak, some copiously, but few people actually actively listen. I remember George Curle (one of our past elders who has now gone to be with the Lord) once making the point rather clearly. He arrived at church and was greeted at the door ... *“Hi, George how are you?”* To which he answered, *“I'm feeling really ill, I've been having these bad chest pains ...”* to which the reply was *“Great, have a wonderful day.”* It's so easy to get caught up and not really listen. I won't even mention what happens at home when mum and dad get home after a hard day and so easily talk past each other. We all do it. But who really listens? We have to consciously make an effort and work at it. But there is One who listens and knows our situation fully: the Lord. David tells us that God actively listens. ***“He has turned His ear to me.”*** God proactively turns His ear to us, to hear our voice. In David's life experience the Lord alone is the One who can be trusted to always hear, always know, always understand. When David felt, quite literally, that his very life was at stake and there was no escape God listened, heard and aided him. And because God is God, He is able to do something about any situation. David learned to trust for the whole of his life, through ups and downs, successes and failures. God is faithful to listen and hear and to be there.

The post-resurrection narrative of the Emmaus Rd encounter of Jesus and two disciples in Luke 24 reminds us of how much we can learn or not learn from those who walk with us. How much do we listen and grow from those we journey with through life? And is it good learning towards fruitful development or is it shallow and distracting from who we really want to be? The two disciples who were walking to the small town of Emmaus were talking alright. They were doing what it is too easy to do in prayer – reciting the list of woes and disappointments they were experiencing. Luke tells us they were sad. It's probably one of the greater understatements. Jesus had died, verified by the soldiers, witnessed by the crowds, His body taken away and buried by Joseph, Nicodemus and the women. Their future hopes and dreams were shattered. Many of the disciples had given up their livelihoods, their homes, even spending significant time away from their families only to have

everything they hoped for dashed to pieces on the harsh stone of Jewish religious ignorance and corrupt Roman justice. Their lives now were also in jeopardy if they remained in Jerusalem. And to add to the indignity, the women had reported that Jesus body had been stolen from the tomb. A sign of further atrocities and public humiliation by the Roman authorities maybe? A carcass to be dragged through the streets by Roman horses to show what happened to rebels or what? The women had repeated the angels' words to the disciples, that Jesus was not there because He had risen, just as He had told them in Galilee. And although it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary Jesus' mother that told them the disciples had written off the women's words as stupidity. The Greek says they saw the women as gushing nonsense. Death was death and it was final.

The disciples had walked with Jesus, spoken with Him and learned from Him for up to three years. They had taken risks and learnt to step out in faith. But like all of us, it is hard to step out beyond what you can see, beyond what you have control over. We can become shuttered against new possibilities by our own limitations. What we need is others around us who will extend our horizons, stretch us, challenge us, encourage us. When Jesus was with them the disciples could look to what He would do and be encouraged. They would respond to His command and report back what had happened. Time and again they would get it wrong but Jesus would put them back on track but now He was gone. They had seen, they had listened, they had learnt, but only in part. They hadn't really understood. How deep is the despair of forsaken hope, dashed dreams?

Now Jesus came alongside the two sad disciples as they walked that dusty road. He was not immediately recognisable to them. Jesus was not in glorified or transfigured form but appeared to them very much as an ordinary person. Luke tells us, their eyes were kept from recognising Him. We might be tempted to think that their despair and their preconception of the possible made it impossible for them to recognise Jesus but this is not the case. We are told that by divine intervention they could not recognise the Messiah.

Jesus sets out to clarify their situation and belief. Why were they sad? Did this stranger not know what had happened in Jerusalem? That the prophet and holy man Jesus, attested to by miracles, had been condemned by the religious leadership, tortured, crucified and died. Then in verse 21 we get the telling words from the lips of the disciples ... ***“we had hoped that He was the One who was going to redeem Israel.”*** Past tense. They had hoped. Their hopes had been shredded and all hope was gone. And incidentally, the women and their hysterical stories had not helped. Time to leave Jerusalem, time to get away.

The response of the stranger lacks subtlety in any culture: **“O foolish ones, how slow of heart to believe what the prophets have spoken of”**. In common with all of the disciples they had heard Jesus message and His repeated teaching about what would happen when He came to Jerusalem. Even if His word was not to be believed, the Scriptures of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew writings, were equally clear. The Messiah had to suffer before He could enter glory. Working through the Scriptures the stranger explained what had happened, how it had been foretold and why it had to happen.

Now, for a moment, put yourselves in the place of these disciples. Do you think you would find it difficult to believe what was happening after you had spent three years with Jesus? Do you think you would do better at believing what He had said and what had been written about him? It's hard for us to really imagine living as we do with the knowledge of resurrection, Pentecost and all that has followed. Yet, at the same time, we still struggle with fully living out faith. But there is a reason for this. If we let it, our human nature struggles,

wrestles and competes with our higher spiritual calling and anointing. Like the disciples we can observe Jesus, even walk with Him, but we are called to walk on our own two feet. It's like a small child learning to walk. They are happy, excited, watching others walk around, they enjoy it when we hold their hands, their arms and help them to take tentative steps but it's not walking – it's steps on the way. Walking occurs when slowly but surely the body is strengthened and the muscles strong enough to pull oneself up and slowly take a step or two. Usually with a few well applauded tumbles. But with repeated effort walking, then running, happens.

What does this 'walking' mean for us today? If we look around us, we know we are well down the road of rampant consumerism and individualisation. We watch with concern the rise of religions that are intolerant of Christianity. In Egypt, Indonesia, India and Africa we see with concern increasing numbers of deliberate murderous attacks on Christian churches and individuals. Even here in NZ it is harder to share faith within the education system and workplace. The tolerant society is intolerant of Christians who would speak out. Yet, at the same time, there is a growing awareness that the core values that have been taught by the church for generations are so often missing and the world is worse off for it. In education there is a growing trend back towards a values based education but the challenge is what values?

If we are to walk by faith then we will do this in a number of ways:

- (1) *Firstly, we will walk the talk in our own lives* – we will live out what we profess – we will be honest, we will follow through on what we say we will do, we will use language that is appropriate, we will demonstrate love, care and forgiveness towards others, we will be faithful in our relationships and we will be diligent in our worship and learning God's Word and about our God and His way.
- (2) *We will actively take a stand against evil around us* – against dishonesty and corruption, against talk that demeans and mocks others, against people who profit at the expense of others, against the pornography and sexual corruption of this age. We will not be passive but deliberately pro-active.
- (3) *We will make a regular and deliberate contribution towards God's work* – whether it be of our time and work within the life of the church, our commitment to prayer, our support of others at the front line and getting others to the front line, our financial contributions and the like. Time is one of our greatest gifts today. How do we contribute this gift to God? We will make sure our community is a witness of unity and love.
- (4) And fourthly, given the opportunity, *we will purposefully share our faith in Jesus* with those we engage with so that they too can come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Like Peter we would see people come to a place where they “[r]epent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

As 1 Peter 1:17 points out God will judge the work of each one of us. This is the second judgement. As Christians we are saved, the first judgement, but we will be accountable for what we do and have to give an account to God for our lives and how we have used the talents He has given us.

This would be too hard except for one wonderful, glorious truth. We do not do this in our own strength. As Jesus came alongside two unsuspecting disciples and then outlined for them what had to happen so too the Scriptures tell us what is happening now. Within this and the history that is unfolding we are told that the Holy Spirit has been given to us as not only Comforter but Helper, as Power and as Guidance so that we can navigate the trials ahead and to ensure that we will, if we live by faith, will come through victorious. As we step out in faith His gifts of the Spirit are activated in our lives.

As King David learnt to rejoice in how God brought Him through the dangers and snares of life so we too are learning to rejoice in God in the same way. And yes, there are lots of people around us who influence us, family, friends and colleagues, but if we listen most to the One who walks with us then we will be in a good place. Even to the point that we, like the two disciples, naturally want to run off and tell everyone else.

Who walks with you? God Almighty and Jesus Christ walk with you in the person of the Holy Spirit – whether you know it or not! Who has the most influence? Whoever you chose to listen to. So practice active listening to God and walk the walk of faith with increasing joy and confidence, even in the midst of the worst the world can throw at you, because God never fails us. Then, one day, He will invite us to a meal, to a feast, a sharing and breaking of bread, that will truly open our eyes.

Amen