

Walking... to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

Story of the Moken People Who Survived the Tsunami of 2004

At the end of 2004 an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered the most devastating Tsunami in history. This Tsunami roared along the various coastlines of the Indian Ocean hammering the entire region from South Africa all the way to Indonesia. The death toll alone is hard to wrap your brain around. How could a two (2) hour event like this result in 220,000 to 280,000 deaths? Would you believe this two (2) hour Tsunami is the deadliest in recorded history?

Now I don't know if any of you remember this Tsunami, but would you if I told you it happened on December 26. It does for me, because death and destruction at Christmas time is almost impossible for me to comprehend. Even though I realize disasters happen when they happen, I just always seem to think of Christmas as being immune to such things.

Now I suspect most of us were celebrating with loved ones and family on December 26, 2004. That is what we do during Christmas. While some travel to be with family, others stay put while family and loved ones' travel to them. Then there are those who might take a once in a lifetime family vacation to some far away resort, like those found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, or Myanmar, also known as Burma. I have never been myself, but from all I read and all I see, the beaches in this part of the world are breathtakingly beautiful and the resort industry thrives because of it. December of 2004 was no exception as thousands of foreign tourists (mostly European) were enjoying all that these beautiful resorts had to offer while on holiday. Would you believe over 9,000 of the confirmed dead were foreign tourists on holiday?

The sadness that grips my heart is still profound when I think about this Tsunami. Then I recall discovering a people called the Sea Gypsies of the Andaman Sea. The Andaman Sea being part of the Indian Ocean where the Tsunami originated. These Sea Gypsies, known as Moken because of their connection to the sea, are a nomadic people who roam and live off of the sea in handmade wooden boats that actually serve as their homes up to six (6) months out of each year.

If I told you every one of the Moken people survived this Tsunami, would you believe me? The deadliest Tsunami in history did not claim the life of a single Sea Gypsy. Now in and of itself, that is amazing, but the amazing part for me is that luck had nothing to do with their survival. It was their connection to the sea... their ability to read its signs. It was their ability to understand what the wild elephants were communicating by running to higher ground. Then there was the complete silence of the Cicadas.

One of the Moken, a man named Saleh Kalathalay (“Sa-lay Coo-lot-oo-lay”) was actually on the mainland close to one of those swanky resorts when he noticed the silence of the Cicadas. His first instinct was not to run to higher ground... no his first instinct was to run around warning everyone he found in the resort. He says the young people first called him a liar. Then his own daughter, who he grabbed by the hand and said child get out of here or you will die, called him a liar.

I wonder how we might react to people calling us a liar. Would we stay around those people trying to get our point across or would we say we have done all that we can do and leave them to perish? Luckily for those skeptical tourists and for Saleh’s daughter, Saleh didn’t leave and for those who initially looked upon him as a strange man to be avoided, a liar if you will, he convinced them to follow him to the water’s edge where they finally saw the danger he had been warning them about the whole time.

Even though his words sounded like gibberish to those tourists, eventually they listened to this stranger in their midst. And you want to know something, every tourist who listened, followed Saleh to higher ground and lived.

Coming to trust in the life saving words of a stranger is what saved the lives of those tourists. Their ability to overcome their skepticism of this strange person allowed them to turn toward the truth. Overcoming their skepticism allowed them to embrace the fact that Saleh came to them in peace, came to them in love. For some, coming to believe in Saleh’s truthfulness didn’t happen immediately, yet something lifted their blindness so they could see their need to trust in the guidance of this stranger.

For me, the story of the tourists and Saleh closely resembles today’s Gospel story of Cleopas and his un-named companion’s encounter with Jesus. Both stories seem to depict what life might look like if we could place our trust in the words of a stranger who seeks to help us.

Choosing to do that is rather amazing, isn’t it? Here we have a man named Cleopas (of whom we never again hear about in scripture) and his friend, who never gets named in the first place, having an intimate encounter with Jesus...after the resurrection, and at first, they have no idea. In fact, they initially call him a stranger and make fun of his lack of knowledge. [Read v. 18]. Yet just like those skeptical tourists, they do not reject this stranger or demand he leave them alone. I wonder if we would react this way to a stranger appearing before us?

There are many reasons I love this story, all of which we cannot discuss in one sermon, but I want to share a couple of them with you today. First, Luke provides us incredible detail in his telling of this story. There emerges an almost dreamlike quality of this chance meeting on the road to Emmaus and the scene around the table as they broke bread together. Then we have this moment of recognition... seemingly causing the immediately disappearance of Jesus... followed by the reflecting upon what he said and what they felt in their hearts as they walked with the one they labeled a stranger.

While it is a wonderful, unique, spellbinding tale, it is also a model for a great deal of what being a Christian is all about. The slow, sad dismay at the failure of human hopes; the turning to someone who might or might not help; the opening of our eyes so that we might find truth. This describes the experience of innumerable Christians, and indeed goes quite a long way to explaining what it is about Christianity that grasps us and holds us in the face of so much that is wrong with the world, with the church, and with ourselves.¹

Next, I love the way Luke emphasizes the importance of relationship because I believe he is offering us powerful instruction about life fulfilled. The thing is we might miss this instruction if we don't slow down because sometimes slowing down is necessary, and this seems to be one of those times.

- If we slow down we might see that Cleopas and his companion aren't trying to process their pain alone.
- If we slow down we might see that no one is trying to process their experiences by themselves.
- If we slow down we might see that no one in this story chooses to isolate themselves in hopes of figuring out how to deal with their disappointment and pain. Cleopas and his un-named companion traveled together and shared their pain with each other.

The pain of shattered dreams.

The pain of hopelessness.

The pain of Crucifixion.

This was no easy cross-roads for Cleopas and his companion for they were now at a point where they had to figure out what to live for. Before the Crucifixion, their vision of the future had brought order and purpose to their suffering... to their lives, but that vision seemed to die at the Crucifixion.

Maybe you all are better than me, but I still can't figure out how to deal with this kind of pain and I don't assume for a minute that Cleopas or his companion knew either. The major difference is that they didn't try to do it alone. Neither of them tried to pick themselves up by their boot-straps and quickly move on with life.

Maybe they knew doing so would never lead to fulfillment in the long run;
Maybe they knew they needed a companion in whom they could confide;
Maybe they knew trying to do it alone would only lead to a painful death; and
Maybe Luke knew how important it is for all generations that follow to know this part of the story.

¹ NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*

You see, this part of the story tells us that we must bring our problems, our agony with us on our journey, but more importantly, at least to me, this story tells us to be prepared to listen to the kind, loving words of a stranger who is doing his/her best to lead us to a fulfilling life. This story tells us to learn to listen to his/her voice... the voice that seeks to explain; the voice that seeks to lead us forward; the voice that will warm our hearts if only we allow. This story so desperately wants us to learn to live inside of it because when we do we will discover the limitless nature of the Good News.

“The disciples’ choice to walk together and talk about all the things that had happened to them was, in some ways, fairly radical. They could have decided that what they had been through was so personal, so traumatic and so confounding that they didn’t want to talk about it until they had gotten a handle on it. Or they could have chosen to walk together but avoided talking about what was really going on, chatting away about anything but that.

But no. While the experiences of the weekend were still fresh and raw, unvarnished and unresolved, they chose to walk together and talk with each other about all these things that had happened. And there was something about the willingness to walk together and speak honestly about the fundamental issues of their lives that caused Jesus himself to come near.

They weren’t praying in any formal way. They weren’t having a Bible study or worshipping in the synagogue. They were not having a formal quiet time. No, they were discussing the stuff of their lives—the things that had happened that were impacting them so deeply—and something about the nature and quality of their conversation opened up space for Jesus to draw near.

The encounter that took place between Jesus and these two disciples was completely reorienting and life changing. Transforming, if you will!

And that is the essence of Christian community. Before Jesus draws near, a group of people journeying together is merely a human community. Once Jesus joins us on the road, it becomes a Christian community. As we discover ways to open to Jesus’ transforming presence we become a transforming community!”²

So today I wonder...

How often do we include strangers in our conversations?
How often do we listen to strangers and heed their advice?

The thing is, maybe those people we label as Strangers are only trying to show us the pathway toward a fulfilled life. As hard as it may be to imagine, especially in a culture that seeks to teach us that a stranger only represent danger, we might actually encounter strangers seeking to love us.

² Ruth Hayler Barton, *Part 1: The Road Between the Now and the Not-Yet*

Strangers who only want what is best for us as well as themselves. Are those types of strangers' worthy of our listening ears... or is it better if we continue to label them as strange, or crazy, or alien?

Far be it for me to project meaning onto a Gospel story, but it certainly seems this story is calling us to accept that following Jesus involves listening to strangers who come in peace and love. Ironically, Saleh seemed to know this without ever claiming to be Christian. Neither he nor Jesus looked for ways to be offended.

Neither of them were offended by the name calling. Their purpose was so much greater than seeking to be offended that name calling became meaningless. They only wanted to save lives. That was their purpose.

As I stand here in front of you today I wonder what the life of this Church might look like if we stop looking for ways to be offended by strangers trying to help? Might we be saved like those foreign tourists who chose to listen to Saleh. Or better yet, might our lives be transformed like Cleopas and his friend?

The Good News is that transformation is possible and my prayer is that we open ourselves to that possibility and allow it to happen.

[Amen.](#)