

Transitions: On the Road

[Ruth 1:15-17](#)

[Luke 24:13-35](#)

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

April 30, 2017

Two friends of Jesus were walking on the Road to Emmaus the same day as the disciples found the empty tomb. It was about seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One of the two was Cleopas; the other strangely didn't have a name. Could it have been a woman? Or maybe *we* are that companion. We don't know where the two were going exactly or why. —Were they going to hide from the authorities? Were they going to stay with friends? Were they wandering because they couldn't just sit still after Jesus had left them? They were talking about the last three days. That's what we do after a tragedy: we talk about it. We try to make sense of what happened and what will happen next.

The road represents a transition. The two were leaving the scene of a horrible death and a mysterious resurrection. On the road, they were sharing feelings—maybe of sadness and fear of the uncertain future. In the liminality of the moment—neither here nor there—they encountered Christ. He entered their conversation as a stranger. Cleopas asked: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” And Jesus answered with a question, “What things?” (He was playing dumb.) He was letting the two of them work out their own understanding. And when they got to the village, Jesus appeared to be going on, and so they urged him to stay: “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” (“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.”) It was the polite thing to do, to invite a stranger to dinner and perhaps to spend the night. And, I am guessing, more than that, they wanted companionship in their loneliness and in their uncertainty about the days to come.

The Road to Emmaus is a liminal space. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *limens*, which means, “threshold.” It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer that would resolve your uncertainty. The Road to Emmaus is a metaphor for our transitions in life.

I am feeling a bit of anxiety about the transition I am soon to make as I retire from fulltime ministry at the end of June. I have plenty to do now, so I am only anticipating the liminal space I will soon experience. How will I frame my week without a sermon to prepare? How will I find meaning in my life without people to visit and plans and programs to nurture? I have some ideas, but truthfully I feel quite unsure about my exact next steps.

Some of you are retired and you know about the adjustment that you went through. Others have faced different kinds of transitions. Some of you have moved to this country, and you lost a home country and perhaps left family and jobs behind. The liminal space of being both Indian or Filipino *and* American meant forming a new identity. Some of you have

faced illness or death in your family, and you had to change who you are. Now you are a caregiver or now you are widowed. Or now you have lost some of your abilities to be mobile, to drive and to enjoy the activities you always loved. Some of you find yourselves in the quandary of whether to stay home or work outside the home, or whether to remain in your home or move to a retirement community. Each option has its advantages and its disadvantages. I realize so often how privileged we are to have choices and not to be dealing with the most basic needs like having a roof over our heads and food to eat. Imagine the liminal space of a refugee in a boat or a camp, helplessly alone, waiting for assistance.

We all know some degree of liminality. We all know the uncertainty of the Road to Emmaus, because the road between one phase of life and the next is always ambiguous. And that ambiguity is universal.

Our church is in a pastoral transition caused by my retirement. Though even if I hadn't been retiring, after six years it would be very normal for the Bishop to move me to another church and to appoint another pastor to come here. This is how the United Methodist system works. Ordained elders are guaranteed appointment in our denomination. And when ordained, we agree to "itinerate," which means "move when the Bishop says move." The Cabinet—made up of the Bishop and the District Superintendents—looks at the needs of all the clergy and all the congregations in the California-Nevada Conference, and makes appointments in June each year. The appointment of Rev. Dr. Henry Kim to be Lynnewood's next pastor was announced early. Some churches are still waiting to hear who their next minister will be.

Anticipating change can be worrisome, but it should also be exciting. Of course, either way, it is a period of uncertainty. But I'd like to remind you that the church is the people, not the minister. You are a strong congregation with a wonderful history of 50 years. And you have capable leaders and a clear vision for the future. You are growing. In the 6 years I have been here you have increased each year in membership and attendance. Nearly every week we have visitors—people to invite into this community of faith.

This transition, like any life change, is an opportunity. Think about Ruth and Orpah on another famous bible road. Naomi had lost her husband and both her adult sons in Moab. Her daughters-in-law were left widowed. Naomi was growing bitter. She heard that there was a harvest in Bethlehem, her home, and so she and Ruth and Orpah headed west, back to Judah. The road home to Bethlehem was a very uncertain trek. Naomi must have been very unsure about what was best because after starting out, she changed her mind and told the young women to go back to their own families in Moab. She said to them: "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud" (Ruth 1:8-9). The uncertainty was palpable—Should they leave Naomi and return without husbands? Or go with Naomi without husbands to a land of harvest but as poor foreigners? They cried. They said first, "No, they would not go back," but then Naomi argued that they must return to Moab. She told them that the hand of God had turned against her and she was bitter.

They wept, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye and went back to Moab. But Ruth made the decision to go on with Naomi. She said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (16). In the uncertainty of the moment of the road, Ruth crossed over the threshold.

She could so easily have retraced her steps back to her family, along with Orpah. It was the alternative that would be safe. She would be in her own country where she had always lived.

But Ruth made the courageous decision to go forward into uncertainty. And if you know the story, you know she married Boas who gave her grain to eat, and she gave birth to Obed, who down the road became the great grandfather of King David. Ultimately Ruth was to be an ancestor of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, Naomi's home, as the story goes.

Ruth walked on the road, in that liminal space, long enough to feel the pain of parting and the insecurity of going against her mother-in-law's wishes. But then she announced with conviction that she would stay with Naomi's people and with Naomi's God.

Ruth knew she needed a community and a God. We know that too. Ruth knew that she could keep walking into a whole new life if she had two things: community and God.

This is what the church is: a community of people drawn together by the love of God. This is what the church is: people who will walk together through uncertain times and over unfamiliar territory because we represent to one another God's love. Visitors are welcome here because in the body of Christ there are no strangers.

Our denomination is walking a difficult road—one of controversy over acceptance of gay and lesbian clergy. On Friday the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church ruled that the consecration of Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto as bishop goes against church law. Her case now goes back to the Western Jurisdiction where she could be tried for being a self-avowed practicing homosexual. In 2019 there will be a special session of General Conference which may resolve our differences as a denomination. Our Book of Discipline has had a statement since 1972 that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." The California-Nevada Conference and other conferences around the country are defying that statement because our Discipline also maintains "all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God." The United Methodist Church is trying to stay together yet seek justice. Change is not easy. But sometimes it is the only right thing.

Though many people might say they believe in change, most would say they themselves don't really want to change. It is uncomfortable. The Road to Emmaus and the road from Moab to Judah are both very uncomfortable. They require a new orientation—a giving up of something familiar and an embracing of something yet to be known. The orientation required of us in every life transition is openness to see in the unknown something positive. Cleopas and his companion did not recognize Jesus until he broke bread with

them. In loving, accepting community, we recognize the presence of God. God is here, walking with us through times of change! We do not walk alone.