

“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Walking on the Earth?”  
Exodus 3:1-6 & Luke 24:13-32

Due to all the lockdowns around the state and the world, people are walking outside more. In our country, this is an unusual sight. As Americans, most of us are used to driving places. But now on any given day, you see people walking around town. And so today as we look with Barbara Brown Taylor at the practice of walking on the earth as a way to save our lives and to help us connect with the sacred, it is an especially appropriate time for this practice.

We will look at two Bible stories and see two different ways of walking. In both cases, people were living under stress and not expecting to encounter God, and yet their readiness levels were different. The first story is from Exodus 3. It is about the encounter Moses had with God which turned an ordinary experience into holy ground. Moses was an outlaw, a fugitive. He had killed an Egyptian man who was beating up a Hebrew man. As a result, Moses had to flee to the desert to protect his own life. He was living the life of a refugee, trying to stay out of trouble. His life was threatened from the beginning when Pharaoh had given orders to the Egyptian midwives to kill all the Hebrew babies as they were being born. Then his mother and sister had to devise a plan to keep his identity a secret. Moses himself doubted that he would be a leader. At this point, he was an old man and had given up on leadership. He became a shepherd and on that day, as he was going about his work tending the sheep of his father-in-law, he came upon a special bush that had fire around it but was not burning.

Biblical scholars have discovered that there is a possible botanical explanation for this phenomenon. This could happen to a plant called *Dictamnus albus*. The whole plant, especially when rubbed, gives out an odor like lemon-peel. It is due to an essential oil, which gives off an inflammable vapor in heat or in dry, cloudy weather, which also becomes solid, exuding from rusty-red glands in the flowers. This accounts for the fact that the atmosphere surrounding it will often take fire if approached by a lighted candle or a spark, without injuring the plant. The amazing encounter with God happened when Moses paid attention to the plant. He was walking and paying attention to the things that were right in front of him. Among rabbinical scholars, the question was once raised, "why was the blaze burning, but not consumed?" After much theological debate, one rabbi noted, "the bush burned and was not consumed so that one day, as he walked by, Moses would finally notice it?" After that encounter, everything changed for Moses. He was able to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He was able to go back to Egypt to save his people and it all started with a mindful walk where he paid attention!

The second story is that of two disciples who were walking away from Jerusalem with a lot on their minds. This is the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had heard the witness of the women about the resurrection of Jesus, but fear and despair had gripped their hearts and minds so tightly that they could not see beyond the execution of Jesus. Their hopes were crushed by his death. Despair was the mood of the day! They could not see any hope for the future of the mission of Jesus. Even the words of the women they had heard about seeing Jesus seemed like foolishness, a fantasy that could not be trusted. They had no reason for staying in Jerusalem. And

because of their deep grief and sense of despair, when Jesus appeared to them, they didn't recognize him at all! They witnessed the events in Jerusalem but didn't really understand them. Jesus walked and talked with them to help them understand what happened but they didn't recognize him. This is a puzzling piece for many biblical scholars. If the disciples knew Jesus, how could they not have recognized him? We can get stuck trying to explain the details of the story or why and how they could have happened or not even happened, but the message here for us is about something deeper. Cleopas and his walking companion had been with Jesus for maybe hours before they knew who he was. Even at a good walking clip and allowing for some brief breaks, the journey between Jerusalem and Emmaus, which is estimated to be seven miles long, will take a good three hours. We are told that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Why do you think they were not able to recognize him? What was stopping their hope? Could it have been their severe sense of loss? Could it have been their fear of being next to die? Could it have been their inability to connect with the stranger on a heart level?

These two stories show us two different ways of walking. The first one is from the example of Moses, where he steps closer to the burning bush and takes off his shoes in reverence. The other is walking without noticing what is really going on around or inside of you. One is a mindful walk and the other is almost like sleep walking. Moses and the two disciples had a lot on their minds, but the difference was that one was awake while the others were numb and unable to pay true attention. We can relate to both stories. There are days when we lose track of what day it is or what month it really is. There are also times when we are so aware of God's presence. Walking can become a lifesaving experience if we are intentional about it. We can bring a level of mindfulness to it that could save our lives by helping us to live more fully and mindfully.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that one of the ways the practice of walking on the earth could become a lifesaving spiritual practice is when we learn to detach walking from the destination. Think about it! Most of our walking is connected to a destination. Taylor writes, "To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are. When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, 'Here, I guess, since this is where I am.'"

That is why walking a labyrinth can become a very powerful spiritual experience. The walk is the activity. The journey is the point. And since we are doing a lot more walking outside these days, I know that we have an opportunity to become more mindful of our surroundings. Even if you are unable to walk, you can benefit from just putting your feet on the ground in intentional ways. Some of us have trouble walking, but the practice can be as simple as being able to ground ourselves through our feet. You can simply take off your shoes and feel the ground beneath your feet. You can also find a spot inside or

outside of your house to walk intentionally and slowly 20 to 30 steps back and forth or in a circle. Let your body guide you while you do this for 5 to 10 minutes each day.

Here is a video for making a simple labyrinth in your home if you have a large enough space for this: <https://youtu.be/H5--pGSEbPY>. Another option is to use a rope to lay down a simple labyrinth: <https://youtu.be/eZRVYfAAd5U>.

We will close with a time of reflection. Remember some of the places and times that you walked this past week. An average person walks about 12 miles a week (not counting exercise). Of the 12 miles that you walked last week, try to remember one walk or spot. Revisit that with your mind's eye. If you are in a wheelchair or on crutches, remember the places you went to. Imagine yourself going through this movement/walk again. Pay attention to the details around you, the smells, the sounds, and the sensations. This could be anywhere. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to that part of your week. Don't try to force it! Now as you are walking, listen to the words from 2 Corinthians 5:7 "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Imagine that walk you took, no matter where it is: your home, a hospital, a workplace, a park, or just down the street. How did you walk by faith? How aware were you of all that was around you? How aware were you of the sacred as your feet touched the ground? Imagine for a moment pausing to taking your shoes off and feel the sacredness of that ground and of that moment. Repeat within your spirit the words, "I am walking by faith, not by sight." Amen.