

YOU NEVER WALK ALONE

“As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus Himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing Him.”

In her book, *Keep A Quiet Heart*, missionary and author, Elisabeth Elliot tells of a man she calls “Ivan” – a prisoner in an unnamed country – who was regularly taken from his confinement to be interrogated, tortured and beaten.

The one comfort in “Ivan’s” life was a blanket he kept in his cell.

And, as he staggered back one day after another brutal interrogation – ready to just collapse -- he saw someone laying there – a stranger completely wrapped in his blanket...

An informer, he supposed.

“I can’t take any more!” Ivan cried out as he collapsed to the filthy jail floor.

“Ivan, what do you mean, you can’t take any more?” a voice underneath the blanket asked.

Thinking it was someone just trying to get information from him, Ivan didn’t elaborate. He merely repeated what he’d said – *“I can’t take it any more!”*

“Ivan,” the voice said...

“Have you forgotten that Jesus is with you?”

Then, in an instant, Elliot says, the figure in the blanket was gone!

Well, barely able to walk just a minute before, Ivan leapt to his feet in amazement and joy.

The next morning one of the guards who regularly abused him couldn't help but notice a dramatic change had come over Ivan!

He seemed like a completely different person!

"Who gave you food?" the guard asked.

"No one," said Ivan.

"But why do you look so different," the guard demanded.

"Because my Lord was with me last night."

"Oh, is that so?" the guard snickered. *"And where is your Lord now?"*

Ivan opened his shirt – pointed to his heart – and said, *"Here."*

"OK. I'm going to shoot you and your Lord right now," the sadistic guard growled – as he pointed his pistol at Ivan's chest.

But, Ivan didn't flinch.

"Shoot me if you wish," he said. *"I'll go to be with my Lord."*

The guard holstered his pistol and shook his head in amazement.

Elisabeth Elliot says, Ivan later learned that his wife and children had been praying for him that very night the stranger appeared wrapped in his blanket.

And, it wasn't long after that Ivan was released and continued preaching the Gospel until he eventually died – an old man – full of years!

I like the story of a certain teacher who was trying to keep the attention of her "first-grade" class on a beautiful, warm spring afternoon.

But, the sunshine and all the sights and smells of springtime proved too much for the distractible children.

And so, the teacher eventually scrapped the lesson plan and gathered her class together in a circle.

“Let’s go around the room,” she said, “and when it’s your turn stand and tell us what you want to be when you grow up.”

So, they went around the circle and each child shared what they wanted to be.

One boy wanted to be a professional baseball player.

Another said he wanted to be a policeman.

A little girl said, *“I want to be a teacher, just like you, Miss Smith.”*

And, on and on they went until they finally came to the quietest and shyest kid in class.

Now, no one expected him to really say much. But, to everyone’s surprise, the little boy jumped up and announced, *“When I grow up I want to be a lion tamer!”*

“I want to get in a cage full of lions and tigers and make them jump through hoops and do really cool tricks, and whatever I tell them to do.”

Well, when he finished, the normally shy little boy looked around the room and noticed that all the others kids were just staring at him in disbelief.

Then, he added, *“Of course, I’ll have my mommy with me.”*

As one person has so aptly put it, *“The presence of someone strong and loving can have a powerful effect on us and make a tremendous difference in our lives.”*

I can -- can’t it?

Well, this was the lesson two disciples on their way to Emmaus were soon to learn!

Now, Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the Emmaus road is an amazing story!

What's also amazing is that Luke's the only Gospel writer to actually record it...

Which is strange because this event would've obviously been well-known in the Early Church.

I mean, it isn't everyday folks find themselves on a stroll with the Risen Jesus!

So, it's a unique story, and Luke shares it in great detail. In fact, he even names "names" – identifying one of the primary participants as a disciple named Cleopas – who may be the same person mentioned in the 19th chapter of John's Gospel.

But, what truly makes Luke different from all the other Gospels – especially Matthew and John – is that this is the very first appearance of the Risen Christ after the Resurrection.

And, that alone is telling!

You see, although rumors of Resurrection were circulating that first Easter Sunday – nobody – and I mean *nobody* -- except a handful of women really believed it. And, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus Himself isn't seen at all until He appears to these two despondent disciples making their way back home – we suppose – to Emmaus.

But, curiously, when Jesus comes to them, they don't recognize Him -- at least not at first. In fact, the Scripture says, "...they were kept from recognizing Him" – making us wonder what God was really up to.

You see, unlike Jesus' appearance to the women at the empty tomb – in which the announcement of His Resurrection is quickly followed by His appearing – here on the road to Emmaus these two disciples are left to stew in their own juices a bit!

In other words, to let disappointment and despair play itself out in their lives a while longer – until the surprise is revealed!

That Jesus had been with them all along!

And, I wonder if that's what Luke was really getting at here.

You see, by telling the story of the Resurrection in his own unique way...

Sharing a story of the Risen Christ no one else shares...

Luke was not only proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel that Jesus is Risen...

But, he was also encouraging us to trust in the Risen Christ even when we don't necessarily feel His Presence in our lives.

You see, in Luke's telling of it, Jesus is certainly present, but He remains hidden for a while. And then, when He finally does appear – it's incognito – at first.

And, this gradual revealing of Himself might be cluing us in on something important we need to understand in our own walk of discipleship and faith.

And, that is, the Risen Christ is always with us – even when we don't realize it ourselves.

Even when life seems empty and void and doesn't have any discernable horizons anymore -- He's still there!

And, that's not just "my" take on it!

That's what Jesus Himself said!

In Matthew 28:20, for instance, the very last thing Jesus says to His disciples is, "*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

Not that "*I'm just with you sometimes*"...

Or, that *“I’m just with you when you’re in church or praying or doing something religious”...*

“I’m with you always.”

Hebrews 13:5 says: *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*

And, in John 14:18, Jesus also says, *“I will not leave you as orphans.”*

In other words, *“I won’t leave you alone!”*

But, what does that mean?

Any day now my nephew Matthew is set to graduate from basic training somewhere down in Georgia.

Matthew is my brother Brian’s eldest son. In fact, Matthew is the oldest of all the next generation of Minihans. So, when he was born back in 1988 it was cause for great celebration in our family.

And, although I’ve shared this with you before, I remember visiting with my brother once and tagging along as he walked Matthew to school on the lower east side of New York.

It was about a 15-minute walk – “one way” – to Matthew’s school. And, it definitely wasn’t through the best of neighborhoods.

There were winos passed out in the streets.

Drug addicts looking for a quick fix.

Flyers scattered along the road advertising X-rated theaters and porn shops.

But, every day my brother walked his son through all this and dropped him off at school and walked 15 minutes back home.

Well, as we walked back ourselves after dropping Matthew off, I remarked to my brother how tedious that must get...

Walking back and forth twice a day.

But, my brother said something that surprised me.

He said, *“Oh, I go more than twice a day.”*

“You see what kind of neighborhood this is. So everyday at 10:30 when the kids go outside for recess, I go down again just to keep an eye on Matthew.”

“I just want to make sure he’s safe and that nobody walks off with him.”

Well, as I thought about what my brother said, it occurred to me that one day I’d like to share it with my nephew.

I mean, he’s a grown man now...

A soldier in the U.S. Army. He’s even got a kid of his own!

But, I’d like to tell him that through countless hours of recess when he was just a little boy, he was never alone!

He never knew it...

But, his father was right there watching him and protecting him all the time.

The Rev. Bruce Sanguin says:

Even when we feel most helpless we are not alone. We may not recognize that the Divine Presence accompanies us through thick and thin, and descends with us even into the depths of hell, but from the perspective of Easter, we are never alone.

You see, this is what the disciples discovered on the road to Emmaus.

They weren't alone either!

But, then Sanguin adds:

It's not that Easter acts as a buffer against the contingencies of life. Bad things still happen. Presidents make tragic decisions. The doctor sits across from us and asks us to have a seat. But in and through it all, you receive the bad news, and suffer whatever life throws at you, with an intuition that "all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Even in the midst of tears you begin to trust that the thermal of Grace will bear you and all creation up.

"You begin to trust that the thermal of Grace will bear you up."

And, this is what's supposed to change us...

This is what's supposed to embolden us and give us the confidence and the courage to begin living differently...

Knowing the Risen Christ walks with us!

I mean, did you notice what effect it had on the two disciples?

As pastor and author Fred Craddock says they begin by "walking slowly and helplessly from Jerusalem to Emmaus – and then hastily and hopefully from Emmaus to Jerusalem."

Things change in a hurry!

And, their entire outlook on life is changed because of the realization of Who was walking with them!

In his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To get Out Of The Boat*, John Ortberg shares a great story.

He says:

One day I was walking with a few friends in Newport Beach, California. We went past a bar where a fight that was going on spilled out onto the street, like a scene

out of an old Western. Three men were beating up one lone opponent, and he was bleeding quite freely.

We had to do something, so we went over to break it up, to warn the aggressors in no uncertain terms that this fight was over. Unfortunately, I have not had much experience in that sort of thing. I missed that day my seminary class covered how to break up barroom brawls.

Breaking up drunken brawls is not a strong area of spiritual passion or competence for me. But somebody had to do something, so we got out of the boat. We spoke prophetically to them, and then I waited for my first fistfight since I had been part of a church deacon board.

However, the thugs suddenly looked up at us with fear in their eyes and started to slink away. This caught me so much by surprise, I almost stopped them to ask why they were running away.

Then I looked behind me. There I saw one of the biggest guys I had ever seen.

He was apparently employed as a bouncer at the barroom, and suddenly I gained a great deal of respect for that profession. I would guess the man stood about 6-foot-7 and weighed 250 pounds or so, with perhaps 2 percent body fat. If Hercules had married Xena the warrior princess, this could have been their child. We called him Mongo. Not to his face, though.

“Mongo” did not say a word. He just stood there with muscles bulging. He looked as if he hoped they would try to take him on. This was an area of massive, breath-taking competence for him. Breaking up fights was his “spiritual gift.”

Ortberg says...

In that moment my attitude was transformed.

“You’d better not let us catch you hanging around here again!” We were different people – because we had a great big Mongo.

I was ready to confront with resolve and firmness. I was filled with boldness and confidence. I was released from anxiety and fear. I was ready to serve somebody who needed help.

Why?

Because Mongo had passed by. I was convinced that I was not alone. The middle of a barroom brawl was a perfectly safe place for me to be.

Then, Ortberg adds:

If I were convinced that Mongo were with me twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I would have a fundamentally different approach to life.

Of course, he's not. I cannot go around with Mongo beside me all the time, and it's probably a good thing.

Because I don't need him.

I have One who is greater than Mongo with me at all times.

Well, that's really the point – isn't it?

So, what would it be like knowing the Biggest – Baddest (and by Baddest – I mean the Greatest and the Best)...

What would it be like knowing the Biggest, Baddest “DUDE” in the whole universe had your back?

Because He does!

Now, that doesn't mean, of course, that life will always be a bowl of cherries!

Because it won't.

To quote the Rev. Dr. David Williamson:

The Risen Christ comes to join us on the journey through the mundane, the ordinary, the perplexing places of our lives. He meets us sometimes obviously, powerfully, wonderfully – but perhaps most often subtly, gently, as a stranger or friend. Jesus comes to us in the in-between, bringing His loving, caring, encouraging Presence. Perhaps He comes through the life of another Christian brother or sister... or an elder or deacon praying with us... Perhaps He comes at a hospital bedside or over a cup of coffee in the lunchroom. In a restaurant, a living room, with a small group of spiritual buddies, a mentor, a therapist, or at a Bible study group; in a downtown restaurant in the middle of the week – and in that encounter Jesus fulfills His promise to us, “*Lo, I am with you always...*”

As Elisabeth Elliot puts it, “*The secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances.*”

You see, the circumstances of our lives change.

They change all the time.

But, the One who walks with us through those circumstances doesn't!

And, He never will!

That's why we can trust Him.

And, that's why we can know even when we don't always realize it, we never walk alone!

Because HE is with us!

And, because, He is Risen!

He is Risen, indeed!

Amen.