My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

It was a warm spring day just a little while ago when my big dog Grace nudged my leg with her nose as I was busy studying the text for my next sermon. Most of you know Grace—a big, fluffy Great Pyrenees, a dog bred for herding and watching sheep. Not playing. Not retrieving. Just being.

But we made a deal, she and I, when we first brought her home from the shelter that I would faithfully agree to walk her if she faithfully agreed to nudge me 3 times a day. And so I told her to wait just a minute as I was nudged and nudged until I put my stuff down and we went outside.

Walking these days got a bit of a rebound during the pandemic, I think mostly because there was no place to go as many businesses, early on, had shuttered. But as we return to our pre-pandemic routines, we are also very much returning to our pre-pandemic patterns, and this includes returning to various modes of transportation over walking. Kids in my neighborhood don’t walk anymore. They have electric scooters, e-bikes, and ATVs. I wonder and worry that we are forgetting how to go for a walk—a real walk.

Grace and I will occasionally meet another dog being walked. More often than not, the person has their eyes glued to their phone looking at who-knows-what, or they have the leash dangling from a pinky finger as the rest of their hands, eyes, and attention tweet and text. Walking for the sake of walking is getting rarer and rarer, just another thing to do while we are busy getting stuff done.

And so it’s good to remember that Jesus did a lot of walking in his lifetime, to the point it could be considered a holy practice if we think about it. He could have asked for the donkey way before Palm Sunday and gone riding around Nazareth, Galilee, and the 35-mile radius around Jerusalem. Some folks might have gone further and donated a nice horse in exchange for healing their child.

But I like to think that Jesus preferred to feel ground beneath his feet, even if it is rather dusty and one could get gravel in their sandals several times a day. Walking kept Jesus connected to God’s holy creation, and everything around him, slowing his pace to notice the birds of the trees, the beasts of the field, the lepers at a distance, a blind man beside the road, a rich young man who had everything and yet had nothing.

If Jesus had chosen to ride, I don’t know that he would have seen these things. Just like when we go on faster modes of transport—the world goes by too fast for us to focus. Jesus would have been above it all, looking down at people rather than being with them. Jesus slows us down, enjoying each moment of our journeys, seeking and seeing the holy moments and people around him.

We always say we want to be more Christ-like, and yet, we’re much closer to the disciples and how they act. Just like last week the ones on the road to Emmaus. They don’t have cellphones to distract them from their walk, but they had a lot on their minds having seen Jesus arrested, tried, and crucified. They’d heard about an empty tomb.

And we’re not told why, but they decided to go away to another town, maybe just to think things through, to be somewhere away from the painful visual and verbal cues that we would today call PTSD. They just needed to get away, and so like so many of us do today when we’re overwhelmed, they went for a walk.

And this stranger comes and walks with them, and they tell him about Jesus’ wonderful teaching, healing, and his death and empty tomb. They don’t even see that what they’re bothered about is walking with them. Our cares get us so tunnel-visioned that we can’t see the holy in our midst, we only see the problems and busy-ness of our minds and troubles. We walk, but we don’t see. We move forward, but aren’t looking at anything around us.

Jesus reminds us we are in charge of our journeys. Some of us are on journeys of pain, despair, confusion, joy, boredom, exploration. But no matter what the subject of our journey, the holy is still with us; we just don’t see it. But God’s acceptance and love is always in the background, in disguise in ourselves, because we’re too busy to notice. But God opens us up to new things, new ideas, new ways of being and living.

Only when we relax our minds are we ready to be amazed, just like when the disciples invited their stranger to dinner. And it was in the familiar ritual of breaking bread that suddenly the holy broke through, and they remembered how it felt to be in Jesus’ presence. That’s when they saw him. It’s a heart thing, not a head thing, this being in the presence of the holy.

And it’s funny like that. Only in remembering and recognizing the familiar are we sometimes open to new starts, to new awareness, new beginnings in our journey. Instead of rushing into all-new-everything, Jesus slows us down and instead of a blur, the destination becomes less important than the encounters, the relationships, along the way. If we think about it too hard, we realize that just as the holy becomes apparent, it disappears. And we’re left wondering: what just happened here?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

 Sacred experiences are not meant to be possessed and captured so that they can be proofs of something beyond ourselves. Sacred encounters are here to give us a holy surprise, to remind us that we should keep our hearts and minds open to what comes our way. Because we are always on the road to Emmaus.

One day Jesus is a homeless beggar, teaching us with the eyes and whisper of compassion. One day he is a child teaching us patience. One day Jesus is dying, giving us the opportunity to stop our lives for someone else who will one day be us.

Maybe the holy is a bluebird on a warm spring day in a garden of daffodils. Maybe it’s that breeze carrying the freshness of the sea air to remind us of the vastness of the seas and their inhabitants. Maybe Jesus comes in the form of someone who drives you crazy to remind us that we have more to learn in acceptance and forgiveness.

There’s a reason Congregationalists called their journey “the Way”. It’s a daily path, winding and straight, narrow and wide, interspersing disappointment with recognition of the holy just when all seems lost.

When we recognize the companions around us on the way, let us see them anew. See them as the disciples did—a holy presence on the road. Thanks be to God, Amen.