

Walk with Me,
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/19/26

Grief – confusion – frustration – disappointment. In the aftermath of Jesus’s death on a Roman cross, Cleopas and his companion find themselves lost in a swirl of emotion. They and their fellow disciples had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, had hoped that this prophet mighty in deed and in word would be the one to break the oppressive yoke of Roman rule over their nation and set God’s people free: free to govern themselves according to God’s laws, free to worship God without outside interference or interruption.

But the religious leaders in Jerusalem – instead of following Jesus into liberation, the religious leaders had handed Jesus over to the same Roman authorities the disciples hoped Jesus would overthrow. And those authorities wasted no time in condemning him to death and hanging him on a tree, a very public reminder to anyone who might be watching: we still hold the power here. Three days later, Jesus is dead in the tomb, the Romans have reasserted their control over Jerusalem, and the disciples’ hopes are dashed.

Now, some of the women disciples are saying that when he went they went to the tomb they found it empty, and that indeed they had a vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive! Others have gone to the tomb and found it as the women said. But Cleopas and his companion – perhaps the companion is Mrs. Cleopas? Luke doesn’t tell us – Cleopas and his companion aren’t sure what to make of all this. It’s too much to process. So they take a walk.

Among the many details of this story that Luke leaves to our imagination is exactly why this pair are on the road to Emmaus. Maybe it’s their hometown – now that the Passover celebrations have ended and their longed-for redeemer is dead, there’s no reason to stick around Jerusalem. May as well get back to the house and back to reality. Or maybe they have a friend in Emmaus who has offered to put them up for a bit while they figure out what to do next, now that this Jesus-following thing isn’t going to work out. Or maybe they just need to take their despair for a walk.

There’s something about a good old-fashioned walk, isn’t there; something about moving your body that changes how you feel. In their 2019 bestseller *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, researchers (and sisters) Emily and Amelia Nagoski argue that we all need to be moving our bodies more – it’s the most efficient way to complete the stress cycle. The stress cycle: something stressful happens and your nervous system reacts. Something stressful happens and your nervous system pumps your body full of adrenaline and cortisol and glycogen, resourcing you to fight or to flee.

Of course humans evolved this physical response to keep us safe from like, a lion chasing us. But our bodies respond the same way to a stressful situation at work or an enraging conversation on social media. And unless our bodies receive a signal that the danger is over, unless we *do something* to tell our bodies that we are safe now, we stay in that heightened state, a state which affects our digestive system, immune system, cardiovascular system, musculoskeletal system and even our reproductive system.

But the authors of *Burnout* explain that even when we can’t remove the stressor – that one family member who is always posting ragebait on Facebook or the constant push to increase productivity at work or the upsetting things we see every day on the news – even when we can’t remove the stressor, we can still help our bodies complete the stress cycle. We can still take control of signaling to our systems that we are safe now: we are safe now, it’s ok to calm down, we are safe, we can return to normal functioning.

Research shows that moving your body is the most efficient way to complete the stress cycle. 20-60 minutes of activity: you choose whether it’s a dance party in the living room or a Pilates class or just a quick walk around the neighborhood. Doesn’t matter what it is, just get up and move. Moving your body *not* an option? There are lots of other ways to complete the stress cycle, too, from breathing exercises to creative artistic expression to big belly laughs. Plenty of strategies for signaling to our bodies: the lion’s not chasing us anymore, we’re safe now, we can stop stressing out.

So maybe those disciples on the road to Emmaus had an instinctive sense that they needed to complete the stress cycle. They had just been through this traumatic thing, this terrifying and infuriating and gut-wrenching state-sponsored murder of their Messiah, enabled by the collaboration of their own religious leaders – they had just been through the most stressful weekend

of their lives and they knew by instinct that they needed to *move*. A couple hours' walk to Emmaus – that sounds like a good way to dissipate the pent-up stress hormones floating around in their bodies.

And more than just the walk, maybe the disciples knew they needed a bit of distance from “the things that have taken place in these days.” Perhaps they sensed that they needed to get away from Jerusalem for a bit, needed to get out of the thick of things, needed to get away to gain some perspective on everything that had happened with the religious leaders and the Romans rulers and their precious Jesus. For me at least, travel always seems to have that effect – if I can manage it, going somewhere else, going to a new place gives me a different perspective on familiar places, helps me to see more clearly where I've been.

Nothing exemplifies the perspective shift that comes with travel better than the reflections of the astronauts who crewed the recent Artemis II mission around the moon. Five days into their journey, the four crewmembers of the mission were asked if they had a message for Earth on Easter Sunday. Pilot Victor Glover took the mic and responded, apparently off the cuff: “As we are so far from earth and looking back at, you know, the beauty of creation, I think that for me one of the really important personal perspectives that I have up here is I can really see earth as one thing. And you know when I read the Bible and I look at all of the amazing things that were done for us, who were created, it's – you have this amazing place, this spaceship. You guys are talking to us because we're in a spaceship really far from Earth but you're on a spaceship called Earth that was created to give us a place to live in the universe, in the cosmos.”

Glover continued, “I think maybe the distance we are from you makes you think what we're doing is special, but we're the same distance from you and I'm trying to tell you – just trust me – you are special in all of this emptiness. This is a whole bunch of nothing, this thing we call the universe – you have this oasis, this beautiful place that we get to exist *together*. I think as we go into Easter Sunday thinking about, you know, all the cultures all around the world, whether you celebrate it or not, whether you believe in God or not, this is an opportunity for us to remember where we are, *who* we are, and that we are the same thing. And that we got to get through this together.”¹

Talk about a powerful perspective shift. To see the Earth whole, to see it in all its beauty and to realize: what a gift. What a gift to exist together in all this emptiness. And what responsibility – what responsibility we have toward one another, what responsibility we have toward one another as one family of creation living together in an expanse of darkness. A very timely reminder in the midst of war and political wrangling, in the midst of the chaos of our moment – we, all of us, are the same thing: God's beloved creation. We belong to each other. And we got to get through this together.

Of course the disciples on the road to Emmaus got the perspective shift they needed, too. But the perspective shift came not just from moving their bodies, not just from getting out of Jerusalem for a while – the perspective shift came from Jesus himself, walking the road with them. From Jesus himself, willing to come alongside them as they tried to work out their doubt and questions, as they processed their fear and anger – Jesus himself, willing to come along for the walk. Taking time to interpret Scripture for them. Taking time to make the purpose of his suffering clear to them. Taking time to help them believe that the resurrection was not an idle tale, as they had feared – no, the resurrection had really happened. And it was the beginning of a future with hope. A future where Jesus's way of radical love would not be localized to a small community in Palestine, but rather embodied in a global community of faithful followers.

As Cleopas and his fellow disciple walked their road together, so we too walk our roads together. As a family of faith in this place, we walk our roads together, holding space for each other. Holding space for each other's fears, doubts, questions, frustrations; holding space for each other's anger and disappointment; helping each other see a new perspective when it's needed; being willing to go the next mile with one another, and then the next, and then the next, until we reach our destination.

And as we walk together, Jesus walks with us. Like Cleopas and his companion, we may not always realize that God is in our midst. Sometimes it will not be until we look back that we will be able to say, were not our hearts burning within us while we were on the road? But whether we realize it or not, we have Jesus as our traveling companion, through the Holy Spirit giving us insight and clarity, giving us help and hope, giving us strength to go another mile. We're in this together. We've got to – we're going to get through this together.