

**5 Lent A    March 29, 2020**  
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**Walking a Gospel Labyrinth**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

This is not the first time in the life of the Church that Christians have been asked to stay home instead of attending certain worship experiences in-person. In the middle ages it was customary for Christians in Europe to participate in the religious ritual of Pilgrimage. A Pilgrimage is not a vacation or a trip to see places for the sake of saying you were there or to have a good time. A Pilgrimage is not spiritualized tourism. Pilgrimage is a journey of heart, mind, soul and body through several places of religious significance where a person participates in specific religious services that are intended to provide an encounter with the Divine. The destination of Pilgrimage isn't what is the middle of the journey, the destination is the return to one's starting point, to home, and to reflect on the change the Pilgrimage caused. Many religions include Pilgrimages as part of their practices, including Islam whose followers journey to Mecca and participate in rituals in order to experience renewal of heart and religious community.

For Christians in Europe in the middle ages, the Pilgrimage people from many walks of life participated in was the Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was suggested all good Christians should make the Pilgrimage at least once in their lives. It was a long and perilous journey just to get to Jerusalem; once there they went to significant places in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection marked by churches, each with its own specific liturgy. It was a way for Christians to walk in the footsteps of Christ in the hopes of feeling a deeper connection to Christ and the Church beyond their local parish.

Historians tell us during the crusades, Christians in Europe were cautioned to forgo the Pilgrimage because of the uncertainty and violence caused by the fighting that made travel dangerous and could result in harm or death for self and others. So, Christians were told to stay home. Sound a little bit familiar?

In order to help Christians stay safe from danger and still experience the religious benefits of Pilgrimage, the Church devised a new way of doing Pilgrimage by utilizing what resources they had and exploring some other practices. The result was a trail that led Christians to a number of different cathedrals in Europe, each one provided a worship experience that was intended to connect Pilgrims to God and each other. The middle of this new trail was what has become one of the most famous cathedrals in the world: The Cathedral at Chartres in France. In the nave of this cathedral is the largest and most recognized labyrinth in the world. It is made of limestone and takes up the entire nave of the cathedral. This labyrinth is so old it is surrounded in legend and mystery. Some historians say it was designed to be a

symbolic entry to the celestial city of Jerusalem. Although it was far from being the same physical and therefore spiritual experience as actually going to the city of Jerusalem, many of the people who walked that labyrinth discovered it was a meaningful spiritual practice. To this day people from all over the world travel to Chartres Cathedral to walk its famous and historical labyrinth. It has also inspired other cathedrals and churches to build labyrinths of their own. Our Diocese's own Procter Center has a lovely outdoor labyrinth in front of its chapel. At Church of the Good Shepherd, we have a smaller labyrinth carved into a tabletop in our churchyard that anyone can "walk" with a stone, marble, trace with their finger, or just their eyes.

The history of the labyrinth reminds us during times when the Church couldn't do what it always had done, it was able to come up with new ways to worship that both utilized resources it already had and discovered new practices that eventually became part of our rich diversity of ways of encountering the Divine.

Encountering the Divine is what is at the heart of today's powerful and somewhat mysterious Gospel: the raising of Lazarus, a story found only in John's Gospel. It is a story that certainly winds around like the serpentine paths of a labyrinth, with Jesus seeming to get to where he was going by taking the long way, even waiting several days to leave. To our sensitive eyes, we might read Jesus was following a stay at home rule by avoiding travel when he didn't immediately take off for his friends' house after hearing the message a good friend was seriously ill and asking for him.

But that wasn't Jesus' intention. That is just the first part of the labyrinth-like journey of today's Gospel. To understand the story better, perhaps we need to look at its center, at the conversation at the heart of the story. In the center of this labyrinth is a conversation between Jesus and his friend Martha. She started the conversation by leaving her home and meeting Jesus before he got there, while he was still traveling. Her words of greeting aren't very welcoming, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Perhaps we can all relate to those words "if you had..." Those words that point to a deep pain and the past that led up to that pain. They reveal a faith in Jesus' ability to heal, and the comfort of his presence. But they also reveal a disappointment in Jesus, maybe even a hint of betrayal that he didn't do not only what she wanted but needed him to do. They are words that, scholar and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright also notes point to the past and looking back at the past in ways that imagine a better present if only things had been different. Wright observes we humans are pretty adept at looking to the past this way, in hope that if only we had done this or that action, things would be the way we want them now. If only we could turn back the hands of time, we could fix what went wrong and solve our problems ourselves.

But Jesus knows it doesn't work that way. And this where his conversation with Martha gets not just interesting, but full of the promise and reality of resurrection. Jesus' talk about Lazarus rising and himself being the resurrection and the life aren't just words of comfort or a way for the author of John's Gospel to proclaim some doctrinal beliefs. It is Jesus' attempt to point Martha away from the past, to get her to look to the future, not just any future, or the future she or we imagine, but God's future, the future embodied by Jesus himself. N.T. Wright reminds us one of the central beliefs of early Christians is that Jesus both came from heaven to earth *and* from God's future to the present. That is what resurrection is: it isn't just doctrine, or future event, it is *a person*. As that person, Jesus sees beyond death to the life God gives, much like Ezekiel was shown in his conversation with God in the Old Testament reading for today. (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

When we look at the rest of the story with this in mind, perhaps we can understand Jesus' weeping may have more to do with what people cannot see than only an example of his being human as well as divine, which can give us comfort when we find ourselves weeping. His rising of Lazarus isn't the resurrection, it is Jesus showing *he* is the resurrection, he is God with Us, showing God is not the bringer of death, but the One who sees beyond death into life and brings that life to us here and now.

It's a powerful story, perhaps one we need at this time of social distance, stay at home directives, fear of a pandemic that has just begun in our country. During a time when the future is uncertain not just in the big picture, but for ourselves personally and for so many of our friends and loved ones. It's a time when we are being told to stay home, and thus won't have the traditional rituals of Holy Week, which starts next Sunday, that many of us look forward to every year. It's a time when we can easily start saying, "if only....." and look to the past for the answers we seek, the comfort we long for, and the hope we need. But today's Gospel reminds us the past is not where any of those things are, and they certainly aren't where Jesus is. Jesus is where he always is: in God's future brought into our present, even if it is only in small ways, even when we aren't in church.

That is how we are reminded even if we can't be at the church together on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Great Vigil of Easter, and Easter Sunday, Jesus is Risen, and absolutely nothing can diminish that joy, not even a pandemic. The story of the Chartres Labyrinth can also inspire and challenge us all to consider how we can continue our path of faith, to follow Jesus even when some of us have to do so from home for a while. We already have everything we need to encounter the Divine, and to share that encounter, and do the work of the Church. Just because we can't gather in the church building does not mean the Church is closed. It is far from closed. The Church is very much alive, because we are alive, and we are the Church; even as it

adapts to this time in its life, a time we are all apart of and are participating in. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus, looking to him to show us how to look beyond the death and loss in our midst to the resurrection we will soon celebrate, that is also here with us in this moment, bringing life, if we will look for it.